

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE: T. E. LAWRENCE AND COALITION LIAISON

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
General Studies

by

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
2001

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
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ABSTRACT

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE: T. E. LAWRENCE AND COALITION LIAISON by Major Curtis S. Milam, USAF, 83 pages.

Coalition warfare has been, and will continue to be, a matter of course for the U.S. military. Developing and maintaining coalitions of politically and militarily diverse members is, at its most elemental level, a matter of human relationships--the person-to-person give and take that characterizes all human endeavor. It is often complex, inexact, and tedious, perhaps more art than science.

The frustration encountered by policymakers and military professionals alike argues strongly for an earnest examination of the personal characteristics and professional principles used by successful coalition builders, liaisons, and advisors. This paper examines the contributions made by T. E. Lawrence to the art of coalition liaison during his service as the British advisor to the Arabs during World War I. Specifically, it identifies the personal characteristics that helped Lawrence work so effectively with the Arabs, as well as the professional principles that guided his actions as he helped form the coalition of Arab tribes and the alliance between those tribes and Britain.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
APPROVAL PAGE.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND.....	1
2. THE RIGHT STUFF.....	31
3. PRINCIPIA LAWRENCIA: RULES FOR LIAISON.....	55
4. THE FIRST MODERN LIAISON OFFICER.....	77
APPENDIX. TWENTY-SEVEN ARTICLES.....	84
GLOSSARY.....	90
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	93
INITIAL DISTRIBUTION LIST.....	95

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

All men dream: but not equally.

T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*

Intended Research

Coalition warfare has been, and will continue to be, a matter of course for the U.S. military. Developing and maintaining coalitions of politically and militarily diverse members is, at its most elemental level, a matter of human relationships--the person-to-person give and take that characterizes all human endeavor. It is often complex, inexact, and tedious, perhaps more art than science. The frustration encountered by policymakers and military professionals alike argues strongly for an earnest examination of the personal characteristics and professional principles used by, successful coalition builders, liaisons, and advisors. This paper examines the contributions of T. E. Lawrence to the art of liaison during his service as the British advisor to the Arabs during World War I. Specifically, it identifies the personal characteristics that helped Lawrence work so effectively with the Arabs, as well as the professional principles that guided his actions as he helped form the coalition of Arab tribes and the alliance between those tribes and Britain.

The Relevance of Lawrence's Story

At the dawn of the twentieth century, a young Englishman, T. E. Lawrence, acting as liaison for the British Expeditionary Force headquartered in Cairo, helped a group of nascent Arab nationalists cobble together a daunting array of tribes and clans to fight a

rebellion amidst the backdrop of World War I. The lessons Lawrence learned and the truths he uncovered are as relevant today as they were eighty years ago.

The politico-military situation Lawrence found himself in was at once complex and sublime. Its roots ran 500 years into the past and involved the intertwined histories of Islam, the Ottoman and British Empires, and the Arab-speaking world. Lawrence's story is worthy of study for two main reasons. First, as the British Army liaison and military advisor to the Arab Army, the literal history of Lawrence's story offers insight into the personal characteristics of a successful liaison officer when confronted with vast cultural, political, and military (technical) differences. Second, Lawrence's *Twenty-seven Articles* provide a codification of the principles Lawrence used when dealing with the Arabs. Though intended for use only with the Arabs, when these principles are stripped of their cultural specifics they provide timeless advice about cross-cultural communication and relationship building.

Today, the U.S. military finds itself ever more dependent on both formal and informal relationships with other nations and their militaries. The increasing use of foreign area officers (FAO), liaison officers (LNO), officer exchange programs, and other programs emphasizing cultural awareness is testament to this need. Lawrence's story is well known, yet it has been viewed almost exclusively as an example of the appropriate and successful prosecution of irregular (asymmetric) warfare. Though certainly relevant in this respect, it has led to a somewhat myopic view of his story. A compelling, yet largely ignored aspect of Lawrence's story is his activities as liaison and military advisor to the Arabs. When considered in context, it becomes apparent that Lawrence was essentially an early, composite version of the contemporary U.S. military foreign area

officer and liaison officer. More than this, Lawrence became one of the most successful LNOs in modern history and arguably the most literate. Lawrence wrote extensively about his experiences, yet his work has usually been considered almost exclusively in terms of adventure writing (due in no small part to Lawrence's carefully cultivated reputation and mythology). A rigorous examination of Lawrence as a liaison officer and advisor has never been undertaken.

Coalitions, Alliances, and Liaison

The history of armed conflict is, to a large degree, the history of coalitions and alliances: Athens against Sparta, Rome against Carthage, Byzantium against Persia, the Thirty Years' War, the War of Spanish Succession, the wars of Frederick and Napoleon, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the two world wars, and countless others. Each of these well-known (and essentially Western) conflicts is characterized by coalitions and alliances.

Often, the distinction between the terms "alliance" and "coalition" is unclear. For this discussion an alliance is a relatively long-lived, formal agreement (treaty) between two or more nations (or political or ethnic groups) against a perceived or implied threat. Though "economic" alliances exist, this discussion focuses only on the military type. In contrast, a coalition is normally a short-lived, informal (or ad hoc) agreement of a political or military nature to confront a specific threat which, when defeated, will also usually mean the end of the coalition. Defined in such a way, coalitions become essentially temporary alliances, though they can (and have) formed the basis for more prolonged cooperation.

The distinction is significant to the discussion at hand--the Arab Revolt as a part of World War I--because Lawrence had to work simultaneously with a coalition within an alliance. The coalition involved the various Arabs chiefdoms in Syria, Mesopotamia, the Levant, and the Arabian Peninsula. It had been a thousand years since Arabic-speaking peoples had fought in such numbers under a unified Arab command against a common enemy. Subsequently, this Arab coalition entered into an alliance with Britain for military and logistical support. The Ottoman Turks were a common enemy for the Arabs and the British, though for different reasons. Although the Turks were also Muslim, the Arabs considered them oppressors and occupiers. For the British, the Turks (allied with Germany) were their World War I adversaries. In the geostrategic sense both Britain and Turkey were at war (principally) for influence and control over the Near and Middle East, including control of the Suez Canal. The Suez Canal was both a lifeline for Britain's colonial trade (mainly with India), and a critical line of communication and supply for the Turkish garrison in Arabia. Additionally, the recently discovered oil reserves in Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf played into the calculus of both nations.¹

Background: T. E. Lawrence

T. E. Lawrence is a complex and controversial character and countless pages have been penned in an effort to separate the myth from the man. The intent here is to briefly examine Lawrence's history, looking for early indications of his future abilities and for times and places where the development of his wartime skills might have begun.

Early Years

Thomas Edward Lawrence was born on the sixteenth of August 1888 in Wales. Called Ned by the family, he was the second of three sons born to middle-class English

parents. His family moved several times during his infancy, including a three-year stay in Brittany, along the channel coast of France. When Lawrence was nearly six, the family moved back to England and settled in a rural area near Southampton. His family preferred the countryside, and Lawrence grew up largely out-of-doors and removed from the more formal aspects of Edwardian English society at the turn of the twentieth century. A governess taught Ned Lawrence and his brothers until 1896 when the family moved once again, this time to Oxford. This move would be the last for the Lawrence family and was made primarily to afford Ned and his brothers an education at Oxford's excellent high school and university.

Like most children of the period, Lawrence's education included a great deal of religious teaching; so, it is not surprising that he displayed an early interest in the Holy Land, particularly its geography, history, and culture. During the same period Lawrence also became interested in medieval architecture, collecting brass rubbings from medieval churches in the area, as well as working during his free time in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum,² where he was attracted by its vast collection of Eastern and medieval artifacts. At the Ashmolean, Lawrence met D. G. Hogarth (the museum's keeper from 1908 to 1927), who would be instrumental in Lawrence's later journeys to the Levant.

Oxford

Lawrence successfully completed entrance exams for Oxford and entered the university in October 1907 as an exhibitioner at Jesus College intending to major in history. These exams are one of the first objective indications of Lawrence's abilities; of 4,645 candidates only twelve outscored him. Toward the end of his first year as an undergraduate, Lawrence became increasingly interested in military theory and history.

After the war, in an article for the *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal*, he wrote, “In military theory I was tolerably read, for curiosity in Oxford years before had taken me past Napoleon to Clausewitz and his school . . . and after a look at Jomini and Willisen (*sic*) I had found broader principles in the eighteenth century, in Saxe, Guibert and their followers.”³ He later told B. H. Liddell-Hart, for his biography of Lawrence, that he, “read other ‘manuals of arms’ of the 18th Century . . . made a series of maps of and visited Rocroi, Crecy, Agincourt . . . saw Valmy and its neighborhood, and tried to re-fight the whole of Marlborough’s wars.”⁴ Lawrence’s earlier interest in medieval architecture, combined with his recent study of military strategy, presented a subject for his undergraduate thesis. Specifically, he was interested in the pointed arch and whether the Crusaders brought the design back to Europe from the East, or took it with them and introduced it to the Arabs. It was this academic pursuit and the path it set him on that would eventually land Lawrence in the center of an Arab Revolt five hundred years in the making.

During his university years, Lawrence began to display character traits that could best be described as quixotic. First, Lawrence seemed to enjoy making intentionally provocative statements, particularly when he felt intellectually threatened. Most of his biographers have ascribed to Lawrence what was essentially an inferiority complex, but one peculiar to an Englishman of the period: he was illegitimate. Add to this his small stature and modest financial situation, and perhaps his peculiarity is more understandable. Lawrence also exhibited ascetic tendencies. He would intentionally go without food or sleep for long periods to test his capacity for hardship and denial.⁵ This desire to do things the hard way is a recurring theme throughout his life. It is almost as if Lawrence

in some way knew what lay ahead and was steeling himself for the ordeal. Indeed, his ability to endure suffering and discomfort proved useful during his years of desert fighting. As Lawrence said in his introduction to *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, his account of the Arab Revolt, “The weak envied those tired enough to die; for our success looked so remote, and failure a near and certain, if sharp, release from toil.”⁶

In the summer of 1908 Lawrence toured France by bicycle examining medieval castles for his thesis. He spent the entire trip tromping over and around castles and fortifications, starting at Le Havre in July. He reached the Mediterranean coast at the town of Aigues-Mortes six weeks later. Lawrence’s letters from this time give insight into his yearning for the East. “I bathed today in the sea, the great sea, the greatest in the world. . . . I felt that at last I had reached the way to the South, and all the glorious East; Greece, Carthage, Egypt, Tyre, Syria . . . they were all there, and all within reach . . . of me.”⁷ During the summer of 1908 world events intruded on Lawrence’s idylls in the form of a coup d’état in Turkey. In his book, *T. E. Lawrence: Uncrowned King of Arabia*, Michael Asher characterizes it as, effectively, “the beginning of the end of the Ottoman Empire, the tottering giant which had dominated the Middle East and Eastern Europe for nearly 500 years. On 22 July, a handful of young Turkish officers took control of the Ottoman 3rd Army in Europe. On 24 July they offered the Padishah Sultan, Abd al-Hamid II, an ultimatum: either grant a constitution or step down. Whichever path he chose, the tyrant’s power was effectively at an end.”⁸

After spending several days along the French Mediterranean coast, Lawrence reversed course and slowly worked his way back to the English Channel, reaching Brittany in early September. On 8 September 1908 he returned to England and Oxford.

His trip had laid the groundwork for his thesis and sown the seeds for his next trip--to the Levant and the Holy Land.

In the fall of 1908 Oxford formed the University's Officer Training Corps as part of several British Army reforms suggested by the Secretary of War, Lord Haldane. Lawrence joined immediately, a move that took several of his acquaintances by surprise. Intellectual dabbling in military subjects aside, Lawrence had exhibited little propensity for things martial. However, as Lawrence's official biographer, Jeremy Wilson, points out in *Lawrence of Arabia: The Official Biography of T. E. Lawrence*, "Lawrence, like most other young men of his social background, felt deeply patriotic."⁹ The experience undoubtedly provided Lawrence a foundation that would ease his later metamorphosis from civilian to military officer. His training with the corps had other, more practical benefits as well. He learned to shoot a Vickers machine gun, a skill he would later use during the Arab Revolt,¹⁰ and he continued to refine his pistol shooting, which he had practiced since childhood.

Coming Home (for the First Time)

The following summer on the eighteenth of June 1909 Lawrence left England for the Holy Land. Bound for Beirut aboard the SS *Mongolia*, this trip was to be counterpoint to his French travels the previous summer, intended to research the other side of his Crusader architecture thesis. The specific details of this adventure are not entirely germane to the discussion at hand, but what is relevant is Lawrence's preparation for and conduct during the trip. Realizing the need for a certain facility with Arabic, Lawrence engaged a Syrian tutor while still at Oxford. He read the books of previous European travelers to the region, including the classic work on Arabia and the Bedu,¹¹

Travels in Arabia Deserta, by Charles Doughty, the most distinguished desert explorer of the era.¹² He also read *A Wandering Scholar in the Levant*, by D. G. Hogarth, keeper of the Ashmolean, and *Practical Hints for Travelers in the Near East* by E. A. Reynolds-Ball. Following a suggestion made in the last work, Lawrence purchased and packed a Mauser automatic pistol for protection on the journey.¹³ Lawrence also spent time with each of the writers gathering insights from their experiences. Hogarth introduced Lawrence to H. Pirie-Gordon, who had toured Syria on horseback the previous summer. Gordon graciously lent Lawrence a map of the country annotated with information gathered during his recent travels.¹⁴ Finally, he secured permission from the Ottomans via an *iradeh* (letter of safe passage) arranged by Sir John Rhys, Principal of Jesus College, and Lord Curzon, Chancellor of Oxford.

A European touring the Levant in summer was unusual, and Lawrence especially so because he intended to walk the route, living as a peasant and relying on village hospitality for his lodging and meals. Though he walked less than planned and covered a smaller area than he would later exaggerate to his biographers, at least half of the time he indeed spent afoot, spending many nights as the guest of Bedu families. Noteworthy here is Lawrence's effort, both before and during his trip, to experience life as his hosts did. Though Lawrence could not entirely shake the preconceptions and condescension inherent in an Edwardian Englishman visiting a "backward" land, his efforts to immerse himself in Bedu culture were admirable. Of course there is no escaping that, in truth, his hosts understood him to be (and treated him as) a wealthy European traveler. This likely made Lawrence more native in effort than in reality, but nevertheless he should be given

credit for seeing the reality of life for a desert tribesman more clearly than most Europeans of the period.

Lawrence learned much on this tour and was able to see nearly all of the sites he needed to complete his thesis. Though bandits and malaria combined to abbreviate his visit, it was, all things considered, a success. There was more than a little *Indiana Jones* in young Mr. Lawrence. He visited over thirty-six Crusader castles, walked over 1,000 miles of Syria in nearly three months, fought gun battles with bandits, slept with the Bedu, and endured several bouts of malaria. Lawrence returned to Oxford in October 1909 (one week late for term), and completed his thesis over the next year. Entitled “The Influence of the Crusades on European Military Architecture--to the End of the XIIth Century,” it was a resounding success. So much so in fact that it led to his next adventure in the Middle East, his last before war and rebellion consumed the desert--and Lawrence.

Mr. Lawrence: Archeologist, Mapmaker, Soldier

Lawrence’s exploits, both as student and traveler, along with his continued work at the Ashmolean, put him in good stead when, in 1910, D. G. Hogarth announced plans to dig at the ancient Hittite city of Carchemish, near the present day town of Jerablus in Syria. Lawrence would participate in the excavation as one of several assistants to Hogarth. Much of what Lawrence would learn at Carchemish would prove helpful later.

Lawrence’s work at Carchemish allowed him to perfect his Arabic and to develop an ear for various dialects. He showed himself to be a master motivator. Asher notes, “Lawrence soon demonstrated that his forte lay in motivating the workers, he would often turn the work into a game, pitting pickmen against shovellers and basketmen until the whole team, including himself, was yelling and running about, and a whole days work

might be accomplished in an hour.”¹⁵ Also, “Lawrence displayed his masterly grasp of psychology by introducing a system by which the overseer would fire pistol-shots to announce the finds, the number of shots varying according to the objects’ importance. . . . Grown men who had gone days without a single shot being fired in their honour were seen to break down.”¹⁶

Lawrence also began experimenting with native dress while at Carchemish--with some success. In fact, on several occasions Lawrence was able to pass himself off as a peasant. Though too fair-skinned to pass for an Arab, the area in Syria where they worked had many fair-skinned minorities, Kurds and Armenians among them, and as long as he did not speak (and reveal his English-accented Arabic), he passed by unmolested. The Turks, of course, had a military presence in Jerablus, and Lawrence was forced to deal with them more often than he liked, mostly on bureaucratic issues involving the excavation. Still, this allowed him the opportunity to observe their organization and soldiers. Also, the Turks were building a section of the Baghdad Railroad near the site, which was, oddly enough, being constructed by German engineers using local labor. This gave Lawrence the chance to view the construction of a railroad nearly identical to the Hejaz Railway (also built under German supervision) that would become so important to him later.

At Carchemish, Lawrence deepened his understanding of the culture of these desert people and of Islam, which were, of course, inseparable. Asher notes, “He was fascinated by their culture and set himself the task of learning all about their customs and language. Not only did he learn the names of all the workers, he also quickly assimilated the names of their tribes and families, and the nature of their relationships. Lawrence

understood almost instinctively that in the Arab world a man is more than an individual: that his family and kinship ties define him.”¹⁷ In an essay for *Isis* magazine (and later included in *Seven Pillars*), Lawrence relates a story that not only gives insight into the character of these people, but also into Lawrence’s efforts to understand them. In northern Syria, Lawrence was taken to the ruin of the Qasr (castle) of ibn Wardan, built by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century.¹⁸ It was said that the clay for the bricks had been kneaded with the “essential oils of flowers” instead of water. The guides led Lawrence through the rooms saying, “this is jasmine, here violet, this rose.” Until finally, they asked, “Come and smell the very sweetest scent of all.” They led him to the east facing windows, open to the vastness of the Mesopotamian plain and the “effortless, empty, eddyless wind of the desert.” They told Lawrence, “This is the best: it has no taste.”¹⁹ Lawrence would later write, “My Arabs were turning their backs on perfumes and luxuries to choose the things in which mankind had had no share or part.”²⁰

Lawrence’s time at Carchemish ended after the 1913 season. In December 1913, while finishing up at the site, he and Leonard Woolley, director of the dig and a reserve officer in the Royal Engineers, received a telegram from the British Museum requesting they to participate in a mapping expedition of the Negev Desert and northern Sinai as part of the Palestine Exploration Fund. Much of this land was indeed uncharted, but Lawrence suspected another motive for the mission. Asher explains, “The real purpose of the survey was military--an espionage mission inside Ottoman territory. Though Turkey had long been an ally of Britain, the far-sighted Lord Kitchener--British Agent in Egypt--suspected that in the event of a war, the Ottomans would ally themselves with Germany. The Sinai protected the British Empire’s jugular--the Suez Canal.”²¹ This

opportunity would later prove propitious for Lawrence. The mission allowed him to conduct a detailed survey of a strategic piece of Ottoman territory. During the mission he was also able to study Aquaba thoroughly. The only good Turkish port on the Red Sea, it was situated at the head of the Gulf of Aquaba and was surrounded by mountains on three sides. If attacked from the sea, the defenders could retreat into the mountains and pin down the assaulting troops on the beaches. From landward, there was only one way in, a steep and narrow canyon called Wadi Ithm. Lawrence realized immediately that Wadi Ithm was the key to Aquaba.²²

Lawrence learned another valuable lesson during the mapping expedition. He and Woolley were en route to Qusayma, a post on the Egyptian-Sinai border, for a meeting with Captain Stewart Newcombe, the officer in charge of the expedition. Somehow (accounts differ) they became separated from their baggage train and consequently failed to show up. Newcombe became concerned and dispatched a detachment of Egyptian border police to search for them and alerted the Turkish border guards on the Ottoman side. The Egyptian unit returned later with the baggage train camels, but not Lawrence or Woolley. Meanwhile, with few alternatives, Lawrence and Woolley continued toward the border on foot. When they arrived they were surprised to learn so many people were looking for them--they had seen no one. The lesson was not lost on Lawrence. He noted in a letter home, "It shows how easy it is in an absolutely deserted country to defy a government."²³ Lawrence would later apply this lesson as he fought alongside the Arabs in the Hejaz.

At 11:00 p.m. on 4 August 1914 Britain entered the Great War. Earlier that summer, Lawrence had returned to Oxford to complete his report on the Sinai mapping

expedition entitled *The Wilderness of Zin*. Lawrence spent the next few months after the declaration of war finishing the text with Woolley. Lord Kitchener, now Secretary of War, wanted the survey published as soon as possible--perhaps to dissuade Turkey from entering the war on Germany's side--and Lawrence was prevented from enlisting until he completed the survey. When finished, he asked D. G. Hogarth to help him find a war job. Hogarth managed to get him work at the Military Operations Department 4 (MO4), the Geographical Department of Military Intelligence, based on a recommendation from Captain Newcombe, the Royal Engineer with whom Lawrence had worked during the Negev mapping expedition. He was given a task for which he was uniquely suited, creating a large-scale military map of the Sinai, which to that date did not exist. He completed it the same day. While still in London, Lawrence was commissioned as a temporary second lieutenant-interpreter. In late October the Ottoman Empire entered the war on Germany's side. Within months, Lawrence would be posted to British Expeditionary Forces, General Headquarters, Cairo--back in the desert he loved.

A Man in Full

Before leaving Lawrence's story and turning eastward toward the Hejaz and the men who have yet to meet the young Oxford graduate with whom they will fight a revolution, what type of man, in sum, was this Lawrence who landed at Port Sa'id in December 1914? To this point in his life, what experiences, associations, and studies, had helped prepare Lawrence for the challenges to come? Can any characteristics of the later "Lawrence of Arabia" be seen in Second Lieutenant Lawrence?

His early years at Oxford provide some insight. He was a socially maladroit young man with a predilection for making intentionally provocative statements. This

quirk caused him no great problems as an undergraduate, where “normal” behavior is often difficult to define and strangeness is, as often as not, dismissed as youthful indulgence. However, in Cairo it would run him afoul of many more traditional military men. In his book, *T. E. Lawrence: A Biography*, Michael Yardley quotes Earnest Dowson, Director of the Survey of Egypt, in the Cartographic Section, as observing, “many men of sense and ability were repelled by the impudence, freakishness, and frivolity he trailed so provocatively.”²⁴ During this same period, according to Yardley, “Second Lieutenant Lawrence became known for driving ostentatiously large motorcycles and for his scruffy appearance--part of a general refusal to comply with the established rules of conduct for young officers.”²⁵ Yet, it may well have been these very attributes that influenced the decision to place Lawrence alone with the Arabs. It likely became obvious to many associates that Lawrence was “unconventional” and perhaps best used as an independent operator in the field (or at least anywhere but headquarters).

Another aspect of Lawrence’s character seen by this point in his career was a tendency to test his endurance through almost ritual self-denial and hardship bordering on asceticism. He had begun to display these tendencies early at Oxford by intentionally going long periods without rest or food in an apparent effort to find his physical and emotional limits. His walking tour of the Levant provides further evidence, precisely because it was literally a “walking” tour in midsummer, through one of the hottest and most inhospitable places on earth. This cultivated ability to endure great physical and psychological strain would prove one of his most valued abilities in the desert, in no small part because the status it gained him among the Beduoin. The Bedu respected strength and courage--Lawrence would show them both.

Lawrence also brought to Cairo a refined understanding of what we today call the operational art, that is, the translation of military strategy into a series of related tactical actions. Though often self-deprecating when later discussing the extent of his military reading, he was in fact extremely well read at the operational level. Lawrence admitted to having studied very few battles, but he wouldn't need extensive tactical knowledge because his value to Arab military leaders would be almost entirely at the operational level. The odd skirmish notwithstanding, Lawrence never engaged a Turkish force in actual battle; rather, he attacked their center of gravity in Arabia, the Hejaz Railway, using raids, sabotage, and harassment.

Lawrence also appreciated the scale and harshness of the desert to a degree few of his contemporaries did. His years at Carchemish and his travels in Syria, the Levant, and the Negev (largely on foot, horseback, or camel), endowed him with an understanding of the desert uncommon in someone so young and so English. Lawrence came to view the desert as a sea and to view desert warfare in naval terms--seeing the Hejaz Railway as essentially a sea-lane, and his Arab raiders as privateers, marauding the Turkish merchant vessels. Lawrence also remembered the lesson of the Negev survey: in the desert you will not find someone who does not want to be found. Strike quickly, then disappear.

Lawrence was fluent in classical Arabic and passable in several dialects. Additionally, he was literate in the theological, philosophical, and practical aspects of Islam. He understood better than most the social context of the Bedu and the social and anthropological history of the Arab-speaking peoples. His time working and traveling among them provided him both insight and appreciation for their culture. Lawrence realized that, in Arabia, loyalty and a sense of belonging extended no farther than the clan

or tribe. He understood the degree to which a desert tribesman defined himself by his past, lived for the moment, and had very little conception of the future. Islam, with its emphasis on the transience of life, was tailor-made for the Arabs, and this understanding left Lawrence well equipped to mount an effective appeal.

Lawrence had also proved to be a gifted motivator, able to inspire loyalty and *esprit* in men. At Carchemish, he had learned how to handle the men at the excavation through a skillful blend of discipline, competition, empathy, and bribery (or *baksheesh*). All of these elements would be used again in the desert as he worked to keep the Arab army together. Lawrence was able to divorce himself from the pedantic English view of spit-and-polish discipline and let the Arabs fight as they had for centuries, wisely rejecting the British inclination to over-organize. He also understood the nuance and minimalism in Arab communication. When Lawrence first met Feisal, the Hashemite sherif leading the Arab army, Feisal asked, “And do you like our place here in Wadi Safra?” Lawrence replied, “Well, but it is far from Damascus.”²⁶ The subtle jab in this seemingly benign exchange powerfully and eloquently demonstrates Lawrence’s mastery of Arab subtext.

Background: Arabia, Islam, and World War I

Whether by happenstance or destiny, Lawrence found himself at the center of a storm 500 years in the making. To understand and appreciate Lawrence’s situation, one must first consider the larger context of the Arab Revolt--the history and politics of Islam and the Ottoman Empire. In Arabia at the turn of the twentieth century there were fault lines running just beneath the surface of the desert--the geopolitical tectonic plates of

Islam, the Ottoman Empire, and Europe. Where they met, friction, strain and eventually violent eruptions occurred.

Arabia I Can Find Immediately; an Arab Will Take a Bit Longer

In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence observed: “A first difficulty of the Arab movement was to say who the Arabs were. Being a manufactured people their name had been changing in sense slowly year by year.”²⁷ Lawrence was an academic, principally an archeologist, but with that came a fair dose of anthropology. So it is not difficult to see why he chose to define the Arabs using language and geography. “There was a language called Arabic; and in it lay the test. It was the current tongue of Syria and Palestine, of Mesopotamia, and of the great peninsula called Arabia on the map.”²⁸ Lawrence took the language distribution and transposed it onto a map. On the north the line “ran from Alexandretta, on the Mediterranean, across Mesopotamia eastward to the Tigris. The south side was the edge of the Indian Ocean, from Aden to Muscat. On the west it was bounded by the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, and the Red Sea to Aden. On the east by the Tigris, and the Persian Gulf to Muscat.”²⁹ Lawrence wrote further, “The origin of these peoples was an academic question; *but for the understanding of their revolt, their present social and political differences were important*, and could only be grasped by looking at their geography” (emphasis mine).³⁰

Up to this point in history, there had been no unified “Arab nation,” or a people called “Arabs.” Tribes, both fixed and nomadic, had inhabited the Arabian Peninsula for the previous several thousand years. All tribes were based on kinship, with the nomadic desert Arabs loosely grouped together under the umbrella term Bedu (hence Bedouin). The Bedu were in reality many clans and tribes³¹ based on extended family relationships.

The salient point here is that there was no sense of a single people. Put in more contemporaneous terms, there was some sense of a country (Arab lands), little sense of a nation (Arab people), and no sense of a nation-state (Arab governance). So the first problem confronting both Lawrence and the Arab leaders of the revolt was to create a sense of common cause and unified purpose with the desired end state being a sovereign Arab nation-state.

To understand the complex situation on the ground in Arabia required an appreciation of Arab history. Lawrence's particular epiphany was to realize there were actually three histories at work in Arabia, each distinct yet intertwined. Though they could be considered individually, to truly achieve understanding one needed to see and appreciate the byzantine and convoluted interplay between them over hundreds of years. Lawrence realized that first, one needed to understand, to some degree, the nearly 1,300-year history of Islam. To a Muslim, religion was not an aspect of life; it was life. Next, one needed to understand the histories of the various families and clans of the Arabic-speaking people. Finally, an appreciation of the Ottoman history of dominion and administration in Arabia was required. An intellectual facility with any of these histories constituted knowledge, analysis of the tapestry the three represented as a whole constituted understanding. These historical threads wove the cloth that was the Arabia of Lawrence's day.

I Hashemite, or I Hashemite Not

The Prophet Mohammed died in 632 leaving no male heir or plans for a successor, or "caliph." Mohammed taught that he was the "seal" (or last) in a long line of prophets, Jesus Christ among them. This led to some tension among his followers as to

whether a caliph was appropriate at all since Mohammed was the last of the prophets. Eventually, the Muslims settled on naming one of Mohammed's earliest followers as caliph, Abu Bakr, who was generally considered the most qualified of his closest companions. This began a period known as the rule of the four "Rightly Guided Caliphs," of whom all but one was unrelated to the prophet.³²

The reign of the Umayyads (a Meccan family unrelated to the Prophet) began in 661, and the political center of the Muslim world shifted from Mecca to Damascus in Syria. In 749, the Caliphate returned to the (claimed) lineal descendants of Mohammed in the form of the Abbasid dynasty, and the capital was moved to Baghdad. The Abbasids were influenced by Persia and used as an army not the traditional Bedu warrior, but the Mamluk, a caste of military slaves from the Caucasus. Asher notes that, "In doing so they had sown the seeds of their own downfall. Inevitably slaves had become masters, and the Caliph had been reduced to a mere puppet whose function was to lend credibility to the Mamluk regime."³³

In 1516, the Ottoman Sultan, Selim the Grim, conquered the Mamluk Army in Syria. The victory gave Selim effective control over the Muslim world, including Mesopotamia and Arabia--a control the Ottomans would maintain for the next 500 years. But Selim got more than he bargained for that day. After the battle he discovered what Asher calls, "a rather unimpressive personage called Mutawakkil, who turned out to be the last in the line of caliphs claiming direct descent from the Prophet."³⁴ Selim the Grim never officially took the title Caliph, but his successors, beginning with his son, Sulayman the Magnificent, used it informally, and the caliphate effectively remained in Istanbul for the next 500 years.

In the Arabia of Lawrence's time, there were three positions of leadership that transcended tribal lines and which loosely combined political and religious authority: the sherifs, who were many, the emirs, who were few, and the caliph, who (as has been seen) was one. To be considered "legitimate" each should be a direct descendent of the prophet Mohammed, though exceptions to this rule pervade Islamic history. The caliph is essentially the religious leader of the "community of believers" (umma) in Islamic theocracy and may also exercise political-military leadership. In the Ottoman Empire this latter role was exercised by the sultan. Subordinate leadership positions, also loosely combining political, military, and religious authority were emirs, who exercised authority over the sherifs who recognized their authority. The sherifs in turn controlled towns, villages, or an area traditionally associated with their tribe, clan, or family. In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence explained it like this, "The title of 'sherif' implied descent from the prophet Mohammed through his daughter Fatima, and Hassan, her elder son. Authentic sherifs were inscribed on the family tree--an immense roll preserved at Mecca, in custody of the Emir of Mecca, the elected sherif of sherifs, supposed to be the senior and noblest of all."³⁵

Sowing the Seeds

The Ottomans used the caliphate to administer the Hejaz and Arabia by manipulating the system of emirs and sherifs. The Arabs were, after all, fellow Muslims, and the Turks found the country easier to rule using Arab administration as a legitimizing influence. Through court intrigue and duplicity, the Turks kept the families of those eligible for the posts at odds with one another--effectively preventing any organized cooperation among them against their Turkish lords. Among these Arab sherifs was a

man named Hussein ibn Ali, a senior member of the Hashemite family of the Hejaz. As the traditional stewards of Mecca and Medina, the two holiest sites in Islam, the Hashemites were the most well known family in the Hejaz and could trace their lineage back thirty-seven generations to the Prophet Mohammed himself.³⁶

The Emir (or prince) of Mecca was traditionally the senior member of the Hashemite family, but under the Turks, the sultan appointed the emir. Hussein was raised in the court of his uncle, the reigning Emir of Mecca. As emir, Hussein's uncle became involved in a plot against the Turks in Assir (present-day Yemen), the territory immediately south of the Hejaz. For his trouble he was stabbed in the streets of Jeddah in 1880, an assassination sponsored by the Turks. Hussein later was appointed a sherif by the Turks, but never forgave the sultan for his uncle's murder. As a sherif, Hussein was an irritant to the Turks and in 1893 Hussein and his three sons (Ali, Abdullah, and Feisal) were forced to move from the Hejaz to Istanbul, where the sultan could keep a closer eye on them. Hussein was allowed to live a rather privileged life in exile for fifteen years, while, according to Asher, "never losing sight of his determination to return to Arabia as Emir of Mecca."³⁷ During his fifteen-year exile, Hussein gained a reputation as responsible, thoughtful, and capable. When the Young Turks seized effective control of the organs of state from the Sublime Porte³⁸ in 1908, they dismissed the reigning Emir of Mecca and, after some discussion, named Hussein to the post. In December 1908 Hussein and his sons (now four, Zeid, the youngest had been born in Istanbul) dropped anchor in Jeddah harbor and set foot in the Hejaz for the first time in a decade and a half. Hussein was returning as the Emir of Mecca.

Hussein returned to a country still firmly under Ottoman control. Arabs comprised nearly half the population of the Ottoman Empire, and as it began to crumble, Istanbul made greater efforts to shore up support in the Hejaz and surrounding territories by appealing to its subjects' sense of Islamic brotherhood. Abdul Hamid II (Sultan from 1876 to 1909) envisioned the creation of a "pan-Islamic" empire as the key to any future for the Ottoman Empire. In this scheme, the Hejaz, cradle of Islam, was vital. The territory held Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, which were the spiritual centers of gravity of Islam and the Arabian Peninsula. In 1901 the sultan began construction of the Hejaz railway from Damascus to Medina, which, Asher notes, was "ostensibly to facilitate the *Haj*. . . . [but] It was not coincidental, of course, that the railway also strengthened his control over these cities [Mecca and Medina], which were a vital part of his Islamic façade."³⁹

Between and Between

When war broke out in 1914, Hussein's position as Emir of Mecca was by no means secure. Hussein and his sons (now all sherifs) had spent the years since 1909 ruling the Hejaz in the name of the Turks, which did little to establish Hashemite credibility as revolutionary leaders. Additionally, two of his sons, Abdullah and Feisal, were actually sitting members of the Ottoman Parliament in Istanbul--hardly a position from which to lead an Arab revolt. However, early in 1914, Hussein sent his son Abdullah to Cairo to gauge British sentiment toward an Arab uprising. The initial British response was tepid at best because England was nominally allied with Turkey. In any event, from 1914 to 1916, Hussein continued a covert correspondence with Ronald Storrs, Kitchener's deputy in the Cairo office. As mentioned earlier, Kitchener fully

expected Turkey to enter the war on the side of the Germans, and British support of an armed distraction on the Arabian Peninsula would be advantageous to British war aims.

Upon entering the war, Turkey declared a Jihad (often translated as “holy war,” but more correctly, “struggle”) against all infidels in Islamic lands. The Turks hoped that Muslim troops in the British and French armies would refuse to fight against fellow Muslims in the Turkish Army. This left Hussein in a very awkward position. For the Turkish plan of Jihad to work, the endorsement of the Emir of Mecca (as keeper of the holy places) was vital, but the Hejaz was supplied with food largely by British ships coming from India, and to a lesser extent, by the Hejaz Railway. If he refused the Turkish demands, he risked a partial blockade of the Hejaz Railway; but, if he acquiesced, the British shipments would stop. Supply to the Red Sea ports was already a concern since Hussein, as an Ottoman official, was technically an enemy of the British. Any aid he gave the Turks (especially nominal support of a Jihad) would invite the British to halt food shipments bound for Red Sea ports; under either scenario his people might starve.

Ultimately, Hussein refused to endorse the Sultan’s Jihad in a maneuver that was at once diplomatically astute and theologically above reproach. In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence described his response, “[Hussein] felt that the Holy War was doctrinally incompatible with an aggressive war [World War I], and absurd with a Christian ally: Germany.”⁴⁰ Concurrent with his rebuff of the Turks, Hussein made “a dignified appeal to the Allies not to starve his province for what was in no way his people’s fault.”⁴¹

Rebellion Revealed

In early 1915, Hussein began receiving messages from Arab officers (posted mainly in Mesopotamia and Syria) in the Turkish Army. These officers were members of several secret societies of early Arab nationalists in the Turkish Army who had sworn loyalty to Hussein. These officers implored Hussein to seize the opportunity provided by the war to revolt now against the weakened Ottomans. Lawrence writes that, "Hussein, as politician, as prince, as Moslem, as modernist, and as nationalist, was forced to listen to their appeal."⁴² Using his three eldest sons, he raised the curtain on the first act of the Arab Revolt. He sent Feisal to Damascus, Syria, to report on the situation within the Arab divisions of the Turkish Army. He sent Ali to Medina to raise an army of volunteers under the pretext of using them to attack the Suez Canal in support of the Turks. And finally, he sent Abdullah to Cairo to reinvigorate talks with the British.

Feisal's initial reports from Syria were positive, but his estimates grew more pessimistic after several setbacks to the British forces (mainly at Kut and Gallipoli). He counseled his father to wait for a more propitious moment to begin the rebellion. In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence paints a vivid picture of Feisal's wrenching existence living under his Turkish master in Damascus, Jemal Pasha, who had discovered the extent of the secret Arab societies. "Jemal would send for Feisal and take him to the hanging of his Syrian friends. These victims of justice dared not show that they knew Feisal's real hopes."⁴³ A scant year previous, Feisal had been president of these very same societies, yet he was forced to play the good Ottoman or risk the entire revolt.

Despite his son's counsel, Hussein believed the time was right for action. He sent word to Feisal in Damascus that the volunteers were ready for his inspection. Feisal

informed Jemal Pasha of his intention to return to the Hejaz to review the troops and make plans before they moved on the Suez Canal. Jemal, however, had grown increasingly suspicious of the motives of his Arab subjects and informed Feisal that he and Enver Pasha⁴⁴ would both accompany Feisal to Medina to review the troops. This thwarted Feisal's initial plan to begin the rebellion upon his return to Medina; he would now have to wait or risk losing the element of surprise.

Lawrence describes a rather hilarious scene in Medina where Feisal, Enver, and Jemal were watching the volunteer Arab Army display and maneuver outside the city. When the Arab chieftains were presented to the two Pashas, one pulled Feisal aside and asked, "My Lord, shall we kill them now?" to which Feisal replied, "No, they are our guests."⁴⁵ Needless to say, the sheikhs protested greatly that they should not let such an opportunity pass, but Feisal was adamant. To ensure their safety, Feisal personally escorted the pashas back to Damascus, passing off the effort as merely that required by Arab hospitality for such prominent guests. However, Jemal and Enver were suspicious of what they had seen, and upon their return sent loyal Turkish units to reinforce the Hejaz. When Feisal returned to Medina he found it garrisoned by the Turkish Twelfth Army Corps under Fakhri Pasha, the same general who, on the order of Sultan Abdul Hamid, had butchered the Armenians in 1895. Feisal realized with dismay that his chance at surprise was gone, but it was too late to stop. In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence describes events less than a week later: "When he raised the Arab flag, the pan-Islamic supranational State, for which Abdul Hamid had massacred and worked and died, and the German hope of the cooperation of Islam in the world-plans of the Kaiser, passed into the

realm of dreams.”⁴⁶ Within weeks of these events, Lawrence was on his way from Cairo to meet Feisal in the Hejaz.

The Elements of Success

Clausewitz tells us that the elements of success for a commander can be viewed in two broad categories. First, the characteristics and attributes of an individual and how these either helped or hurt the enterprise, and second, the objective principles applied in pursuit of success. In *On War*, Clausewitz stated, “The man of action must at times trust in the sensitive instinct of judgment, derived from his native intelligence and developed through reflection At other times he must simplify understanding to its dominant features, which will serve as rules”⁴⁷ The chapters that follow will examine Lawrence from these two perspectives. Chapter 2 will consider the man; specifically, what skills, knowledge, personality traits, etc. helped Lawrence be an effective liaison and military advisor. Chapter 3 will consider Lawrence’s *Twenty-seven Articles* as the principles, or “rules” he applied to the task. These articles represent Lawrence’s thoughts and ideas on his liaison work from both a conceptual and a practical standpoint. When freed of their Bedouin context, they provide insightful, well-reasoned, and relevant advice on the art of liaison.

¹Oil deposits of unknown potential discovered by the British in 1908.

²Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1989), 28.

³T. E. Lawrence, “The Evolution of a Revolt,” *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal* (October 1920; U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Combat Studies Institute Reprint 1990): 5.

⁴T. E. Lawrence, *T. E. Lawrence to his Biographer Liddell-Hart* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938; Garden City New York, Doubleday, Doran, 1939), 50; quoted in Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1989), 45.

⁵Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 44.

⁶T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (New York: Random House, 1991), 29.

⁷T. E. Lawrence to his mother, 2 August 1908, *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence*, ed. David Garnett (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd. 1938), 53.

⁸Michael Asher, *Lawrence, The Uncrowned King of Arabia*. (New York: Overlook Press, 1998), 49.

⁹Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 52.

¹⁰Asher, *Lawrence*, 58.

¹¹Term used to describe the nomadic, Arabic-speaking tribes of the region.

¹²Asher, *Lawrence*, 57.

¹³*Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁴Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 55.

¹⁵Asher, *Lawrence*, 82.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 113.

¹⁹Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 40.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Asher, *Lawrence*, 115.

²²*Ibid.*, 118.

²³T. E. Lawrence, *The Home Letters of T. E. Lawrence and his Brothers* ed. M. R. Lawrence (Oxford: Blackwell; New York: MacMillan, 1954), 284; quoted in Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1989), 139.

²⁴Ernest Dowson, *T.E. Lawrence by his Friends*, ed. A.W. Lawrence (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd; Garden City, New York: Doubleday Doran, 1937), 131-44, quoted in Michael Yardley, *T. E. Lawrence: A Biography* (New York: Briarcliff Manor, 1987, Cooper Square Press, 2000), 66.

²⁵Michael Yardley, *T. E. Lawrence: A Biography* (New York: Briarcliff Manor, 1987, Cooper Square Press, 2000), 65.

²⁶Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 92.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*, 34.

³¹Generally accepted usage holds that “clans” refers to groups of extended family (related by blood), and “tribes” refers to groups of clans related by leadership, community, and custom.

³²Asher, *Lawrence*, 53.

³³*Ibid.*, 54.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 49.

³⁶Asher, *Lawrence*, 51.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 50.

³⁸The sultan and his court in Istanbul.

³⁹Asher, *Lawrence*, 51.

⁴⁰Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 50.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., 52.

⁴⁴The most powerful of the Young Turks, Enver was Defense Minister of the Ottoman government and Commanding General of the Turkish Army. He was for all intents and purposes the practical leader of the Ottoman Empire.

⁴⁵Ibid., 53.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 213.

CHAPTER 2

THE RIGHT STUFF

God will not look you over for medals, degrees, or diplomas, but for scars!

Elbert Hubbard

A Liaison Dialectic: Carl Plus One

What follows is not so much a study of what one man brought to the fight, but more an effort to use Lawrence's experience to study what makes a good liaison officer. Are there certain skill sets and personality traits best suited to this type of work? Obviously yes, but more to the point, what are they and can they be developed? What was it about Lawrence that contributed to the stunning success of the Arabs?

In *On War*, Clausewitz wrote that great military leaders “must be *familiar with the higher affairs of state* and its most intimate policies . . . [and] *know the character*, the habits of thought and action, and *the special virtues and defects* of the men whom he is to command” (emphasis mine).¹ This suggests a framework for studying the skills and experiences Lawrence brought to his role as British military liaison. In the above excerpt, Clausewitz identified three broad areas of knowledge as prerequisites for effective military leadership. The first area is an intimate knowledge of the “affairs of state,” which, for this discussion, will be characterized as political and military intelligence. The second area is an understanding of the “character” of your men, which, for the benefit of a more contemporary audience, will be considered the sociocultural background of the actors in the context of the conflict. The third area is an appreciation of the men's “virtues and defects,” which, stated differently, represent their military capabilities. Finally, since Clausewitz's observation was concerned strictly with military

leadership, it is necessary to add to his three areas one additional area unique to liaison: the ability to develop relationships of mutual trust and respect. Thus categorized, Lawrence's personal characteristics and talents as a liaison officer lend themselves well both to critical analysis and as a guide for contemporary liaison officers to model their development.

Know the Affairs of State: Political and Military Intelligence

By virtue of his position in Cairo, both in the military intelligence branch and later working for the Arab Bureau, Lawrence was exceedingly well versed in the politics and intrigue of the region. Lawrence's boss in Cairo was Lieutenant Colonel Gilbert Clayton. Clayton had headed the intelligence department in Cairo prior to the war and enjoyed a close relationship with Major General Sir John Maxwell, the commanding general, and Lord Kitchener, the British agent (later replaced by McMahon). Clayton also ran the Egyptian civil intelligence branch in addition to being the Cairo representative of Sir Reginald Wingate, Governor-General of the Sudan. Through these positions, Clayton answered to the three highest-ranking British officials in the Middle East.² In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence described Clayton as, "the perfect leader for such a band of wild men as we were. He was calm, detached, clear-sighted, of unconscious courage in assuming responsibility. He gave an open run to his subordinates."³ This relationship provided Lawrence *entrée* into the highest levels of policy and diplomacy; Jeremy Wilson notes that, "Through Clayton, the enthusiastic specialists [Lawrence, et. al.] recruited to the new Intelligence Department soon found themselves involved in the largest questions of future policy, both military and political. Lawrence shared fully in this political work."⁴

This access helped Lawrence to become intimately familiar with the regional grand strategy. Most notably, he was aware of efforts by France to deter early British operations in Syria--bypassing Arabia. The motive for French reticence was Paris's postwar desire to rule Lebanon and Syria: Lebanon because France felt protective of the large Maronite Christian community living there, and Syria because of a desire for a French-controlled greater Syria that would include Syria and the Levant. These French ambitions were the single greatest threat to Arab nationalism in the region and Lawrence had reason to resist them. As Wilson noted, "The British, as protectors, would rule indirectly, working through the existing political system on the Egyptian model. This was quite unlike French colonial practice, which sought to reorganize every overseas territory on French lines."⁵ Though Lawrence was not privy to all the Machiavellian machinations of the diplomats (most notably the secret Anglo-Russo-French, Sykes-Picot Agreement, which promised Syria and the Levant to postwar France), he did have an excellent grasp of the major issues surrounding the conflict. This knowledge gave Lawrence the perspective needed to capably advise Feisal in the field.

Up to this point the discussion has focused on Lawrence's understanding of the conflict in its larger context from the perspective of the Europeans, but he also grasped the political realities facing the leaders of the Arab Revolt. To use a modern phrase, Lawrence understood that, "all politics are local." In a passage from *Seven Pillars* Lawrence demonstrates a strategic-level political understanding of Hussein's challenges in rallying popular support for the uprising and the tightrope walk needed to maintain it. By implication, these challenges also describe the political inertia for the uprising that Hussein had to overcome.

Particularly in Mecca and Jidda public opinion was against an Arab state. The mass of citizens were foreigners--Egyptians, Indians, Javanese, Africans, and others--quite unable to sympathize with the Arab aspirations, especially as voiced by Beduin; for the Beduin lived on what he could extract from the stranger on his roads, or in his valleys; and he and the townsman bore each other a perpetual grudge. [but] The Beduin were the only fighting men the Sherif had got; and on their help the revolt depended.⁶

This degree of insight was rare for a foreigner in Arabia, and perhaps rarer still for an Englishmen of this period, most of whom were unaccustomed to considering the social and political nuances of less developed societies.

During his posting in Cairo, Lawrence also initiated (and was editor-in-chief) of a daily briefing paper called the Intelligence Bulletin. The bulletin generally ran about ten pages and was circulated among all general officers, high-ranking civilians, and the intelligence staff. Wilson notes that, "Lawrence's work on the Intelligence Bulletin had given him an encyclopedic knowledge of the Ottoman Empire, and also of the Turkish army and its dispositions. Each day an immense amount of military and political information passed through his hands."⁷ In addition to the Intelligence Bulletin, Lawrence developed a weekly Arab Bulletin, which he wrote and circulated. As the primary source of information for both of these documents, Lawrence was without peer in Cairo on political and military matters concerning the Arabs and Turks. In *Seven Pillars* Lawrence writes, "I was charged with the 'distribution' of the Turkish army and the preparation of maps. By natural inclination I had added to them the invention of the Arab Bulletin, a secret weekly record of Middle-Eastern politics."⁸

Because of his linguistic skills, Lawrence was often asked to debrief captured or deserted Turkish troops. The information gleaned during these interviews allowed Lawrence to pinpoint the location of specific units in the Turkish army and provided

insight into its logistical situation and morale. This kind of detailed military intelligence was invaluable when he became liaison to Feisal. In addition it revealed to Lawrence the degree of disaffection among Arab officers in the Ottoman army. Specifically, it helped Lawrence become very familiar with the two Arab secret societies at work in the Ottoman Empire. The first, *al 'Ahd*, was comprised of Arab military officers within the Ottoman army based in Mesopotamia; the other, *al-Fatat*, was the Arab intelligentsia, merchants, and landowners in Syria. Both of these groups were dedicated to Arab nationalism and had maintained contact with the Hashemites for years about a possible revolt against the Ottomans. Lawrence's knowledge of the groups provided him further insight into the strategic context of the revolt and gave him additional credibility with Feisal.

Know the Character of Your Men: Personal, Cultural, Language, and Religion

Judging Personal Character

The ability to evaluate quickly and accurately the character and competence of key individuals is an important skill for any military officer--particularly for those engaged in liaison duties where cultural and societal differences can create barriers to effective communication and cooperation. During the Arab Revolt, Lawrence (like any soldier involved in an ongoing campaign) continuously made evaluations and judgments about the individuals with whom he dealt. Particularly noteworthy, however, was the uncanny accuracy of Lawrence's estimation of people; it was perhaps the single most impressive skill among his personal attributes. Lawrence demonstrated time and again a knack for separating wheat from chaff in terms of the many colorful characters involved in the Arab Revolt.

Perhaps the best example was when, within just a few weeks, Lawrence first met the four sons of Hussein ibn Ali, the Emir of Mecca. This occurred during Lawrence's first trip to the Hejaz in an official capacity (when seconded from the intelligence staff to the Arab Bureau) in order to accompany Ronald Storrs to Jeddah and "appreciate" the situation surrounding the Arab Revolt. This appreciation, or estimate, included, among other things, trying to determine which Sherif had both the capacity and the character to lead the revolt. As Lawrence put it, "to find the yet unknown master-spirit of the affair, and measure his capacity to carry the revolt to the goal I had conceived for it."⁹ He began at Jeddah where he met Abdullah, the emir's eldest son, then continued up the Red Sea coast to Rabegh where he met Ali and Zeid (the number two and four sons respectively), and finally to an encampment in Wadi Safra where he met Feisal. In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence describes each of these meetings and relates, quite effectively, his first impression of each man. It is fascinating reading, all the more so when considered in light of the eventual prosecution of the revolt. The character insight demonstrated by Lawrence is impressive and should be studied by anyone who believes that determining the measure of a man is important. Lawrence's official biographer, Jeremy Wilson notes that, "The nature of his work during the Arab Revolt demanded many such judgments of character, and from the success he achieved it is clear that he was rarely wrong."¹⁰

In Jeddah, Lawrence observed about Abdullah: "As our conversation continued, I became more and more sure that Abdullah was too balanced, too cool, too humorous to be a prophet: especially the armed prophet who, if history be true, succeeded in revolutions. During the physical struggle, when singleness of eye and magnetism, devotion and self-sacrifice were needed, Abdullah would be a tool too complex for a

simple purpose.”¹¹ A few days later in Rabegh Lawrence met Ali, whom he described as, “dignified and admirable, but direct; and he struck me as a pleasant gentleman, conscientious *without great force of character*, nervous, and rather tired.”¹² Lawrence also considered Ali “too conscious of his high heritage to be ambitious; and his nature was too clean to see or suspect interested motives in those about him. Consequently he was much the prey of any constant companion, and *too sensitive to advice for a great leader*” (emphasis mine in both).¹³ Zeid was only nineteen at the time and hence quite easy for Lawrence to dismiss, though he did reflect that, “Zeid, of course, was even less than Abdullah the born leader of my quest. Yet I liked him, and could see that he would be a decided man when he found himself.”¹⁴

Feisal was the last of the sons of the emir Lawrence met. From Rabegh, Lawrence took two camels and a guide for a three-day trek inland along Wadi Safra to Feisal’s encampment in the small town of Hamra. Feisal had suffered several recent reverses from the Turks who, having recovered from the initial Arab assaults, were now pressing the Arabs south. Feisal was in his present location largely due to Turkish advances around Medina. This point is important to underscore the emotional and physical condition of Feisal upon first meeting Lawrence: he was exhausted and recently beaten. All the more telling then is Lawrence’s reaction to his first meeting with him, where he remembered, “I felt at first glance that this was the man I had come to Arabia to seek--the leader who would bring the Arab Revolt to full glory.”¹⁵ And also, “In appearance he was tall, graceful and vigorous, with the most beautiful gait, and a royal dignity of head and shoulders.”¹⁶ Other accounts of Lawrence’s impression of Feisal convey somewhat less glowing appraisals but each ultimately leads to the same

conclusion: that if the Arab Revolt was to be successful, it would be under Feisal's leadership.

As a liaison or advisor, the ability to make quick and accurate character evaluations is a valuable skill worth the investment of some time and effort. A study of Lawrence demonstrates that he spent most of his time in meetings and discussions quietly listening to others speak and rarely interjecting his own opinions. While this was in part an effort to buttress Feisal's leadership, it was also a characteristic Lawrence exhibited throughout his life. He was an observer of people and it was a practiced skill that worked well for his role as an advisor. Today, most modern militaries encourage initiative in their junior officers, yet too often this initiative may gain its outward expression as brash, ill-considered, and abrasive behavior, which is ultimately counterproductive, particularly for a liaison officer.

Cultural Literacy

Enamored of the East since his youth, Lawrence had a firm intellectual grasp of the society in which he set to work. His academic background, coupled with the wisdom accumulated during his travels, proved to be a potent mixture of practical and intellectual experience. In *Seven Pillars* Lawrence comments, "I had been many years going up and down the Semitic East before the war, learning the manners of the villagers and tribesman and citizens of Syria and Mesopotamia. My poverty had constrained me to mix with the humbler classes, those seldom met by European travelers, and thus my experiences gave me an unusual angle of view."¹⁷ Many examples of Lawrence's empathy with, and insight into Arab culture are found in his personal recollections of the war as well as second hand accounts of his story. The Bedu were the primary fighters in

the Arab Revolt and consequently Lawrence most often dealt with Bedouin chieftains on operational and tactical issues. To a European, Bedouin culture was alien in the extreme. Asher went so far as to say the Bedu lived “in a different space-time continuum from the European.”¹⁸ However, if the “Arabs” had a definitive culture, it was Bedouin, and Lawrence knew this perhaps better than any European serving in Arabia at the time.

This deep appreciation for, and understanding of, Bedouin society was the foundation for Lawrence’s success--with it he was able to organize and help lead the Arab irregulars using their clan and tribal bonds as a lever rather than an obstacle. Lawrence understood the three main imperatives of Bedouin culture: clan honor, personal reputation, and material reward. Lawrence skillfully manipulated these imperatives to achieve his goals. As noted earlier Lawrence used his time in Syria to develop his skills as a motivator and leader, learning all he could about his men and then using that knowledge, combined with his mastery of Bedouin society, to direct their actions toward ends he desired. Of course, Feisal and the other Arab chieftains did likewise, but they were Arabs. Lawrence, on the other hand, was from a world apart, and his chameleon-like ability to operate in an alien culture is a testament to his consummate skill.

Lawrence’s understanding of Bedouin society, his knowledge of their clans and local politics, was particularly impressive. A passage in *Seven Pillars* demonstrates this point. During his first visit to the Hejaz, in December 1916, Lawrence was guided by a Bedu named Tafas, from Sherif Ali’s base in Rabegh to Feisal’s camp in Wadi Safra. On the way they would pass through land controlled by a tribe on less than cordial terms with the Hashemites (and by extension the Arab Revolt). Lawrence’s observations during the trip demonstrate his mastery of the complex Arab-Bedu social fabric.

The Masruh Harb, who inhabited Rabegh and district, paid only lip-service to the Sherif [Ali]. Their real allegiance was to Hussein Mabeirig, the ambitious sheik of the clan, who was jealous of the Emir of Mecca and had fallen out with him. . . . [Mabeirig] was known to be in touch with the Turks. . . . Tafas was a Hazimi, of the Beni Salem branch of the Harb, and so not on good terms with the Masruh. This inclined him towards me.¹⁹

Sensitivity to, and awareness of, local politics at this level was rare in a European officer, and it demonstrates again, in part, why Lawrence was so successful. He was literate in the social order of the region and used this knowledge to inform his decisions about the rebellion.

Linguistic Skills

At the beginning of the campaign, Lawrence's Arabic was passable, but he continued, whenever the opportunity presented itself, to improve not only his usage, but also his vocabulary and range of dialects. For example, during the march to Aquaba, Lawrence rode in the company of Auda, chief of the Howietat tribe, through whose land they passed on the way north. The Howietat were renowned fighters and were willing to adopt most causes if enough gold (and opportunities for embellishing one's reputation) were available. They were not ardent Arab nationalists, but were perfectly amenable to killing Turks if duly rewarded. During the hot march toward Aquaba, Lawrence availed himself of their company and tutelage in Arabic dialects. "[They] took pains with my Arabic, giving me by turn lessons in the classical Medina tongue, and in the vivid desert language."²⁰

His linguistic skills helped Lawrence recognize the nuance and subtleties in spoken language that can only be sensed through direct communication between individuals. Imagine the difficulty and awkwardness had Lawrence needed an interpreter to discuss grand strategy or battlefield tactics with Feisal. It would have amounted to an

ever-present barrier between them, with the interpreter unwittingly acting as a filter through which each man's thoughts and ideas passed. Even the most skilled and loyal interpreter would be unable to mimic the speaker's inflection and emphasis so important to spoken dialogue. Communication between Lawrence and Feisal would have been indirect even when standing next to one another and Lawrence's persuasiveness and passion would have been literally lost in translation.

Religious Sensitivity

Many British officers serving during the nineteenth and early twentieth century had a basic understanding of Islam. Britain's long colonial experience in India, Malaysia, and Indonesia had yielded an officer corps conversant in many aspects of Islam. However, the depth and clarity that characterized Lawrence's understanding of Islam and its implications for the true believer were unique. At Oxford, Lawrence had studied Middle Eastern civilizations extensively. These studies provided an historical grounding in Islamic history and theology. Additionally, his years working in Syria further impressed upon him the demands of Islam on the faithful.

The metaphysical aspects of Islam were the hardest for westerners to grasp, yet these aspects were crucial to understanding the Bedu and, hopefully, motivating them to action. One aspect of Islam was a universality that helped explain the Bedouin worldview. In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence described a Muslim as one who, "could not look for God within him: he was too sure that he was within God. He could not conceive anything which was or was not God."²¹ Therefore it was unprofitable to use religion as a lever in the same way Christians might, i.e. God is on our side. Rather Feisal and the

other Arab chieftains used Islam as a rallying point as co-religionists, not because God liked them and disliked their enemy, who after all were also Muslim.

Another common theme in Islam was a sense of fatalism and predestination, reminiscent of pre-enlightenment Europe. As Asher points out, in the eyes of a Muslim, “everything was related in God: in which a man must accept what befell him because it was the will of God. The Bedu had no lust to explain, no thought to solve, no notion to improve--the answer to every question lay not in reason but in faith.”²² This determinism made motivation a challenge. It is difficult to rally the troops to fight the enemy if they believe success will come if it is God’s will, and, if it is not, then no amount of fighting will make any difference. More often than not, the answer lay in creative motivation (read: booty and *baksheesh*), which was the predominant method the Hashemites used to entice the Bedouins to fight the Turks. Lawrence’s understanding of the theological basis for the practical reality made him much more comfortable with the fungible nature of Feisal’s forces. Lawrence understood that Feisal’s army would grow and shrink as tribes joined and departed, and there was little point in worrying about it. It is an interesting situation where one can trace an operational characteristic to a theological basis.

The salient point is that Lawrence’s understanding and appreciation of Islam had direct and positive consequences on his ability to work productively with the Arabs. Additionally, it is not surprising that Lawrence realized early on that the Arab Revolt was *not* a religious war. Today we consider it axiomatic--Muslims conflicts have a theological basis. In Lawrence’s day this stereotype was no less pervasive among Westerners. However, in the case of the Arab Revolt, the cause was nationhood, and the emir took great pains to avoid any religious subtext to the struggle. In *Seven Pillars*,

Lawrence states it plainly. “Of religious fanaticism there was little trace. The Sherif refused in round terms to give a religious twist to his rebellion. His fighting creed was nationality. The tribes knew that the Turks were Moslems, thought that the Germans were probably true friends of Islam. They knew the British were Christians and that the British were their allies.”²³ Lawrence’s knowledge of Islam and Bedouin culture helped him recognize the limited role Islam would play in the Arab Revolt.

Know the Capabilities of Your Forces: Strengths, Weaknesses, and a Plan

Lawrence’s written and editorial contributions to the Intelligence and Arab Bulletins in Cairo required voluminous daily research, which ultimately made Lawrence the most well read “Arabist” in the theater. If what Sun Tzu said was correct, “Know the enemy, know yourself; your victory will never be endangered,”²⁴ then Lawrence was well prepared. He already knew the capabilities and tactics of the Turks when he arrived at Feisal’s side, and, though less well versed in the virtues of Bedouin raiding parties, he quickly pinpointed their strengths and devised a plan to use them to best effect against the Ottoman army.

Lawrence had been with the Arabs only three months when, in March of 1917, after the successful Arab assault on Red Sea port of Wejh, Lawrence fell victim to malaria and dysentery and was bedridden in his tent for ten days. Up to this point in the fighting things had been moving quickly and Lawrence had been, by necessity, all action. He now used this period of forced idleness to, as he put it, “[consider] the whole house of war in its structural aspects, which was strategy, in its arrangements [furniture], which were tactics, and in the sentiments of its inhabitants, which was psychology.”²⁵ Perhaps his fever gave Lawrence a clarity of mind that comes when one is reduced by infirmity or

distraction to consider things at their most elemental. Or perhaps, as Liddell-Hart proposed in *Lawrence of Arabia*, Lawrence's position as a military "amateur" actually worked to his benefit, leaving him unconstrained by conventional thought and without a professional reputation to blemish. Liddell-Hart offers that in such a situation, "his [Lawrence's] greater capacity for thought may provide an impulse to clear the ground of accumulated débris, and achieve a new construction on his wider foundations of study, which he can now check by personal experience and actual conditions."²⁶ In any event, Lawrence emerged from his sickbed with an epiphany about how to fight the Turks.

Terrain, Geography, Time, and Space

Lawrence had a well-reasoned and insightful grasp of the Hejaz terrain and its operational implications for the Arab Revolt. In *Seven Pillars*, he recorded the following ruminations, "The Arab war was geographical, and the Turkish army for us an accident, not a target. Our aim was to seek its weakest link, and bear only on that till time made the mass of it fall."²⁷ Lawrence realized that, though psychologically important, Medina was operationally irrelevant to the campaign. The Turks had retaken it, but of what use was it to them, and what use would it be to the Arabs if they retook it? Better to let the Turks stay there and expend resources defending it and the railway. After the war Lawrence would explain to Liddell-Hart, "They [the Turks] were harmless sitting there [Medina]; if we took them prisoners they would cost us food and guards in Egypt; if we drove them northward into Syria, they would join the main army blocking us in Sinai. On all counts they were best where they were."²⁸ Lawrence realized that they had already won the Hejaz part of the war. The Arabs controlled ninety-nine percent of the land in the Hejaz including the major towns of Wejh, Rabegh, and Jiddah. With these

they could receive British supply ships and control Red Sea traffic. Medina did not occupy strategically significant terrain, and the rest of the Hejaz was desert, which the Bedu owned and the Turk dared not venture into. Lawrence realized he could leverage his military position by using the complementary aspects of the inhospitable desert environment and his light, mobile Arab irregulars to keep the Turks on the defensive without exposing his men to battle with a materially superior force. In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence observes, “Most wars were wars of contact, both forces striving into touch to avoid tactical surprise. Ours should be a war of detachment. We were to contain the enemy by the silent threat of a vast unknown desert.”²⁹ Perhaps Lawrence unconsciously drew some of this idea from Clausewitz, whom he had studied years before. Echoes of this strategy are found in *On War*, where Clausewitz said, “The probability of direct confrontation increases with the aggressiveness of the enemy. So, rather than try to outbid the enemy with complicated schemes, one should, on the contrary, try to outdo him in simplicity.”³⁰

The Armies

Lawrence also clearly understood the unique characteristics of the Arab irregulars Feisal commanded and, perhaps more importantly, he appreciated their inherent military limitations. Lawrence was, of course, knowledgeable on the Ottoman army and its “dispositions.” His analysis in *Seven Pillars* of how best to fight them was evocative and shrewd. “[The Turkish] Armies are like plants...nourished through long stems to the head. We [Feisal’s army] might be a vapour, blowing where we listed. Our kingdoms lay in each man’s mind; and as we wanted nothing material to live on, so we might offer nothing material to the killing.”³¹ Put less eloquently, but more succinctly, Lawrence

proposed to deny the Turks a target and force them to nail jelly to the wall. The Turkish army was heavy, ponderous, and logistically ravenous--characteristics that Lawrence would turn to the Turk's disadvantage. In an area like the Hejaz, a large operations footprint and a long logistics tail were burdens--ones Lawrence would make the Turks regret.

The weapons the Arabs would use were speed, movement, and surprise. They were not willing or able to conduct large-scale assaults against organized Turkish forces, and Lawrence realized they would be foolish to do so. As Liddell-Hart notes, "So long as the Arabs had space to fall back on, their delaying power might be equivalent to defensive power. And they could have the advantage of unlimited space so long as they had no vital point to cover. That advantage was possible with a nomadic people."³² As Lawrence later told Liddell-Hart, "The virtue of irregulars lay in depth, not in force."³³

Mobility Overmatch

Lawrence's experiences in Syria and his intelligence work in Cairo showed him life was cheap to the Turkish military--particularly the lives of young conscripts. Equipment was far more important to the Turks, particularly for Jamal Pasha in Medina, whose line of supply and communication was the long and tenuous Hejaz Railway. Lawrence observed, "In Turkey things were scarce and precious, men less esteemed than equipment. Our cue was to destroy, not the Turk's army, but his minerals [materiel]."³⁴ Hence he organized his raids to inflict material damage, not casualties. Such a tactic had two compelling rationales. First, avoiding Turkish troops limited the exposure his men faced to an enemy who outgunned them. Second, when attacking the railway, it dictated an unstated policy of "the more remote the better," because doing so forced the Turks to

expend greater effort and risk longer exposure to repair the damage. In counterpoint, Lawrence understood implicitly that the Arabs would not endure heavy casualties. Though this may at first glance seem odd for a society as militant as the Bedouin, Lawrence was in fact particularly perceptive in this case. He realized that the very tribal nature of Feisal's Bedouin troops precluded a strategy that promised heavy casualties for the Arabs. The Bedouins were not faceless, nameless regulars like the Turkish formations, but family and friends, each an individual known to the group, the loss of whom would weigh heavily on them all. As Lawrence put it, "An individual death, like a pebble dropped in the water, might make but a brief hole; yet rings of sorrow widened out therefrom. We could not afford casualties."³⁵

Taken in sum, Lawrence's analysis of the war and how to fight it was nothing short of brilliant. It probably would have been unsuccessful in any other theater in the world, but it was perfect for Arabia. Lawrence skillfully constructed his "house of war" by connecting grand strategy to an operational scheme, which in turn implicitly dictated his choice of tactical engagements--both in scale and character. Lawrence also kept his eye on the prize, not letting the "fog of war" obscure his vision of the ultimate aims of the campaign--British and Arab. Officers in today's military can gain insight into contemporary liaison challenges with coalitions and alliances by studying how Lawrence crafted a strategy ideally suited to his situation, using his study of military history and theory and his knowledge of the cultural and historical context in Arabia.

Build Relationships: Mutual Trust and Respect

Loyalty and Perceptions

The final aspect of the “art of liaison” as practiced by Lawrence that warrants discussion was his ability to develop and maintain a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Success in any cooperative endeavor depends upon the capacity of the principals to trust one another and work together toward a common goal, no less true today than it was for Lawrence in 1917. However, the liaison officer is often presented with a unique situation where, by the very nature of the position, his motives are often considered suspect. This dilemma raises a significant issue that most liaison officers will eventually confront. Namely, *it is an inherent characteristic of liaison that one is essentially serving two masters*, and, as is the case more often than not, the goals of each master are not entirely congruent. Liaison duty requires loyalty to one’s own nation (and its objectives), while simultaneously convincing the second party that its interests are equally important and worth achieving. Ultimately, the liaison officer must convincingly represent that the goals of his nation and the goals of the host nation are essentially congruent in their aims and that advancing either nation’s goals helps both nations in the end. It is a bit of a Gordian knot because the liaison officer is confronted with an inherent dilemma between his ultimate loyalty and his proximate loyalty. Lawrence’s particular dilemma was how to serve England and Arabia without being a traitor to either.

Goal Congruency

To achieve both Arab and British goals for the revolt, Lawrence needed to gain Feisal’s unquestioning confidence. As Wilson notes, “To succeed, he [Lawrence] must turn his friendship with Feisal into a relationship of deep and unshakeable trust.”³⁶

Lawrence had to translate his loyalty to England into actions that would appear congruent with the Arab goals of nationhood. Ultimately, Lawrence considered himself a failure in this regard, and *Seven Pillars* is permeated by a deep sense of guilt over what he considered his ultimate betrayal of the Arab cause. For the purposes of this thesis, however, it is useful to consider how Lawrence balanced these competing demands during the revolt and fostered an effective relationship with the Arab principals based on mutual trust and respect. It is undeniable that at the operational and tactical level Lawrence was successful, even if ultimately it was a strategic disappointment for the Arabs--at least in terms of the Hashemite vision of a unified, and independent, Arab nation.

The British wanted a Middle East divided between the United Kingdom and France, and preferred that Arab self-governance be confined to the Hejaz (or perhaps the Arabian peninsula) under British mandate. Additionally, Britain would retain Egypt and gain control over Palestine, Trans-Jordan (present-day Jordan), and Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq). France would control Syria and Lebanon. Though Lawrence was unaware of its existence at the beginning of the revolt, Britain, France, and Russia (the Entente) had already concluded a secret treaty to this effect called the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Britain, however, was simultaneously encouraging the Arabs to revolt with an implicit promise of a unified Arab nation after the war. The Hashemite idea of a unified and free Arab nation included the Arabian Peninsula, Palestine, Trans-Jordan, Lebanon, Mesopotamia, and Syria. Though territorial details were avoided in British discussions with Hussein, none of the territories were explicitly ruled out as potentially part of an independent, post-war, "Arab nation." Herein lies the basis for Lawrence's

dilemma. He had to find a way to be a loyal Englishman while not betraying the cause of the Arab nationalists he was sent to advise. This task was further complicated by the fact that Lawrence felt great personal empathy for the Arab cause.

Finding the Mutual Interests (Aligning the End States)

Lawrence was not entirely naïve about the ultimate British aims; he had spent too much time in Cairo to be unaware of the strategic maneuvering between the European powers. In his introduction to *Seven Pillars*, he states, “It was evident from the beginning that if we won the war these promises [to the Arabs] would be dead paper.”³⁷ Though often idealistic in his writing, Lawrence was a realist in his actions and he dealt with the duplicity inherent in the British position by concentrating his efforts on actions beneficial to both Arab and British desired end states. The common denominator of both camps was defeating the Ottoman army in the Middle East. By contributing to this end state, Lawrence could fulfill his obligations to England without betraying the Arabs’ grander designs. Lawrence’s approach was essentially to create a *fait accompli* favorable to the Arabs based on possession of territory. In other words, he hoped to do so well on the battlefield that at the inevitable post-war peace conferences the Arabs would be in a strong bargaining position. Lawrence’s hope was that “I would survive the campaigns, and be able to defeat not merely the Turks on the battlefield, but my own country and its allies in the council-chamber.”³⁸ It was his (and the Arabs’) best chance and Lawrence’s frank and straightforward approach in working toward it gained Feisal’s trust and respect.

Militarily, the British wanted the Arab Revolt to act as a diversion, tying up as many Turkish forces as possible in the Hejaz to prevent them from fighting against the British army in Sinai and Palestine. The Arabs, on the other hand, needed to push north

towards Damascus as far as possible in order to have some moral (and physical) claim to the region at the post-war negotiations. Lawrence, believing he could do both, devised an operational and tactical scheme that, while not at odds with British war aims, was designed to put the Arabs in the strongest possible bargaining position at war's end. He put the British in a position of "owing a debt" to the Arab forces by virtue of their performance on the battlefield and their support of Allenby's British army during the drive for Damascus. In addition, he was honest and forthright with Feisal about issues that were obviously delicate and somewhat embarrassing for Lawrence, particularly the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which Lawrence divulged to Feisal once he became aware of its existence. Wilson noted that Lawrence "was to be attached to Feisal's staff for the foreseeable future, and it would be better to establish mutual trust at the outset. Sooner or later the truth would emerge, and if he lied now, his relationship with Feisal would be constantly at risk."³⁹ This helped convince Feisal that Lawrence could be trusted and that his motives, while perhaps not entirely pure, were sympathetic to the Arab cause.

In this way Lawrence did his best to deliver the desired end state to both the British and the Arabs. Britain ended Ottoman rule in the Middle East due in no small part to the effectiveness of the Arab Revolt, and the Arabs, now free of the Turks, and in a strong bargaining position for the coming peace conferences, also had reason to be pleased. For his part Lawrence, acting as an honest broker, was able to establish and maintain a relationship of trust and respect with both principals.

Military liaisons and advisors today continue to be confronted with competing, incongruent, and transitory national objectives. Lawrence's story is instructive because it demonstrates how a talented and motivated officer can help channel the efforts of all

parties toward those things common to the interests of both. Lawrence is certainly an extreme example, and it is difficult to imagine a modern officer having (or wanting) the power and independence Lawrence enjoyed. However, the way in which he worked to meet the expectations of his own nation, while remaining as honest and candid as possible in his advice to the Arabs, is a strong lesson for officers today who find themselves in similar situations.

The Right Stuff is a Moving Target

Lawrence's success as a liaison officer and advisor to Feisal during the Arab Revolt was helped by his vast academic and practical experience in the region combined with a firm intellectual grasp of the region's social history, religion, and language. Lawrence was quite likely the most well versed Englishmen in the Near East on matters of the social and cultural dynamics in Bedouin society, and he used this knowledge to help organize, motivate, and direct the Arab Revolt. However, the "right stuff" is not always the same stuff. Though the exploits of T. E. Lawrence provide an excellent object lesson of how one officer successfully used his talents, education, and energy to help win a campaign, it should not be considered a recipe useful in every situation. Lawrence applied a unique set of "competencies" (his right stuff), to a unique situation, and was a winner. Though many of Lawrence's lessons are transferable; the real lessons lie in Lawrence's general approach, not his specific techniques. Lawrence's approach was characterized by good background knowledge (or intelligence) at all levels, an extensive knowledge of the context of the revolt combined with linguistic and cultural skills, a well-grounded strategic and tactical concept based on the capabilities of his forces, and highly developed interpersonal skills oriented toward the society in which he worked.

- ¹Clausewitz, *On War*, 186.
- ²Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia* , 168.
- ³Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 57.
- ⁴Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia.*, 169.
- ⁵*Ibid.*, 177.
- ⁶Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 68.
- ⁷Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 197.
- ⁸Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 62.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, 67.
- ¹⁰Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 362.
- ¹¹*Ibid.*, 67.
- ¹²*Ibid.*, 76.
- ¹³*Ibid.*
- ¹⁴*Ibid.*, 77.
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, 91.
- ¹⁶*Ibid.*, 97.
- ¹⁷Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 55.
- ¹⁸Asher, *Lawrence*, 155.
- ¹⁹Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 77.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 233.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, 40.
- ²²Asher, *Lawrence*, 155.

²³Ibid., 101.

²⁴Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 129.

²⁵Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 192.

²⁶Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 129.

²⁷T. E. Lawrence quoted in, Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 137.

²⁸Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 131.

²⁹Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 194.

³⁰Clausewitz, *On War*, 142.

³¹Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 192.

³²Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 130.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 194.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 359.

³⁷Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 25.

³⁸Ibid., 26.

³⁹Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 361.

CHAPTER 3

PRINCIPIA LAWRENCIA: RULES FOR LIAISON

I must develop a system, or be enslaved by another man's.

William Blake, *Jerusalem*

Chapter 2 examined the personal characteristics that made Lawrence an effective liaison officer. This chapter will shift the focus from the personal (individual) to the philosophical (systemic) and study the principles that Lawrence used to guide his actions during the Arab Revolt. Fortunately, for the student of history, a clear and concise codification of Lawrence's principles not only survived the war, but also, along with *Seven Pillars*, has been widely read and has come to be considered a classic of its genre.

After the successful capture of Aquaba by Feisal's army (with Lawrence's instigation and participation), the intelligence staff in Cairo realized that: A) Lawrence had been successful beyond anyone's expectation; and, B) He was likely to get killed. Epiphanies such as these led to concern over losing Lawrence's quite considerable knowledge about the Arab Revolt. To mitigate this potential loss, the intelligence staff in Cairo asked Lawrence to record the lessons drawn from his experiences thus far in the Hejaz to serve as a sort of primer for other British liaison officers serving with Arabs. Lawrence did so in a dispatch to the Arab Bulletin dated 20 August 1917. Expressed in commandment form for, as Lawrence put it, "greater clarity," these *Twenty-seven Articles* have become part of the Lawrence legend. Equal parts lessons learned and *modus operandi*, they are at once active and reflective. Meant to be executable, they also serve as a thoughtful and considered meditation on how to best deal with Arabs in particular and another culture in general.

If, as Lawrence described, strategy is a “house of war,” and tactics its “arrangements,” then the *Twenty-seven Articles* are the foundation stones for the entire affair. Though Lawrence intended them for use with the Bedu, his *Twenty-seven Articles*, when stripped of their specific cultural references, are transferable to other similar situations and provide a glimpse into the workings of Lawrence’s mind and his approach to liaison. For today’s officer, the articles represent an eloquent distillation of Lawrence’s thoughts on leadership, organization, motivation, and manipulation (in the positive sense of that word). They reinforce the idea that much of the art of liaison is concerned with transcending boundaries to arrive at what is essential to any relationship, namely, the human connection and cooperation between actors required to succeed in a joint endeavor.

The discussion that follows centers on eight of Lawrence’s *Twenty-seven Articles*. The eight chosen are the most relevant to liaison work in the twenty-first century and least tied to the Bedouin of the early twentieth. The articles chosen are reproduced verbatim to preserve both the eloquence of Lawrence’s prose and avoid the possibility of subtly changing the meaning through paraphrasing.

Article One: Make a Good Start

Go easy just for the first few weeks. A bad start is difficult to atone for, and the Arabs form their judgments on externals that we ignore. When you have reached the inner circle in a tribe you can do as you please with yourself and them.¹

It is not surprising that Lawrence chose to begin with, “make a good first impression;” it is, after all, a universal admonition in establishing relationships. In a narrow sense, Article One is about the emphasis Bedouin culture places on hospitality over punctuality, an aspect driven by environment and religion. In the sandy wastes of

Arabia, time is not a precious commodity, but friends and families are. In Bedouin culture one should enjoy the latter at the expense of the former. Likewise, Islam (like many religions) emphasizes the eternal at the expense of the temporal. Events that befall a man in a day (or a life) are God's will and occur in God's time--*inshaalah*.² This cultural trait presented a major challenge for most Europeans, particularly military men for whom punctuality was both a staff virtue and a battlefield necessity.

Lawrence understood the need to conform his behavior to the pace and priorities of Bedouin life. As a liaison officer his position among the Arabs was advisory, and it was important to begin relationships on a foundation that was comfortable for the "advised party"; otherwise all might be lost before he even started. In their book, *A Touch of Genius: The Life of T. E. Lawrence*, Malcolm Brown and Julia Cave note that, "Here his unconventionality, aided by his Carchemish experience, was a strength. His ability to listen, to gain his points by not pushing too hard for them, and his willingness to *tune his behavior to the practice of his hosts* made him acceptable to them and enabled him to assume from the outset a *positive and effective role*" (emphasis mine).³ Michael Asher further notes, "When tribal sheikhs came to declare for the Hashemites . . . Lawrence would vanish, realizing that a first impression of foreigners in Feisal's confidence would do harm to the cause."⁴ Ultimately, Lawrence's deference would help gain him Feisal's trust and confidence.

In a broader sense, Article One is a statement about cultural differences and perceptions. An effective liaison officer must be aware of and sensitive to the cultural context of his actions as well as his host's perceptions of them. Implicit in Article One is the concept of cultural literacy, i.e. the belief that an effective liaison must be a student of

the society and culture within which he works. It is not easy and requires constant attention but, as Lawrence said in his introduction to the *Twenty-seven Articles*, “If we are tactful we can at once retain his good will, and carry out our job—but to succeed we have got to put into it all the interest and energy and skill we possess.”⁵

Article Two: Walk a Mile in Their Sandals

Learn all you can about your Ashraf⁶ and Bedu. Get to know their families, clans, and tribes, friends and enemies, wells, hills and roads. Do all this by listening and indirect enquiry. Do not ask questions. Get to speak their dialect of Arabic, not yours. Until you can understand their allusions avoid getting deep into conversation, or you will drop bricks. Be a little stiff at first.⁷

Lawrence used Article Two to emphasize the importance of being familiar with those things most important to his sherif, while remaining as unobtrusive and transparent as possible. The Bedu are distrustful and suspicious of strangers, particularly strangers full of questions. An aggressive and hurried approach will simply guarantee the liaison officer uncooperative and taciturn companions. In some areas, Arabia among them, successful liaison officers must learn to make estimates without open queries or interrogation, which only lead to guarded comments and raised defenses. In terms of Lawrence’s technique, Asher noted that he often, “watched and listened and chewed over every detail, delved into motives and machinations beneath the surface, analyzed the characters he had to deal with. He was always on his guard, tried to never speak unnecessarily, constantly watched himself and his actions.”⁸

Lawrence followed his own advice when developing his relationship with Feisal. In *Seven Pillars* he recounts his first “quality time” with Feisal a few days after being assigned permanently to him early in 1917. Feisal’s army had just pitched camp near the small village of Nakhil Mubarak, not far from Yenbo. Lawrence recounts: “We stayed

here two days, most of which I spent in Feisal's company, and so got a deeper experience of his method of command."⁹ Lawrence considered Feisal's leadership style to be extremely patient, even-handed, and self-controlled, describing it as, "a further lesson to me of what native headship in Arabia meant."¹⁰ For Lawrence, the liaison officer's goal was to determine his sherif's values, priorities, and style of command, and then apply that knowledge when advising him. When operating in a strictly advisory capacity, it becomes manifestly easier to get things done by knowing what buttons to push. By understanding Feisal's reality, Lawrence was better able to subtly influence his decisions to benefit the overall revolt.

Article Two ends with a cautionary note: know how deep the water is before you dive in. A smart liaison knows his comfort level and stays within it, particularly early on. New liaison officers were the intended audience for the *Twenty-seven Articles* and Lawrence wanted to stress to them the importance of taking the full measure of a situation before making their professional and emotional positions apparent. Lasting impressions are often made early in the game, consequently, early misstep are difficult to correct. Contemporary liaison officers would do well to heed Lawrence's advice. Today, Western (and particularly American) officers have a pronounced tendency to be too familiar too soon, risking ill-advised comments or actions. For Americans it is a reflection of the openness and informality of their society, characteristics uncommon in many other societies. Americans, as products of their own history, have a fairly well-developed distaste for pomposity and self-importance, however, many Eastern societies are still quite stratified, a characteristic that often makes them appear pretentious and ceremonious. When placed in such societies, Americans must make concerted efforts to

avoid offense. The deference implied by Lawrence's first two articles is difficult for many American officers to apply, but it is often a necessity in a coalition or alliance setting.

Article Three: Accept Their Chain (and Style) of Command

In matters of business deal only with the commander of the army, column or party in which you serve. Never give orders to anyone at all, and reserve your directions or advice for the C.O., however great the temptation (for efficiency's sake) of dealing direct with his underlings. Your place is advisory, and your advice is due to the commander alone. Let him see that this is your conception of your duty, and that his is to be the sole executive of your joint plans.¹¹

Article Three is classic "chain of command"; however, Lawrence's version was something of a departure for the period. European liaisons had a tendency to bypass local leaders in pursuit of a European conception of "efficiency." In Article Three Lawrence makes a point about local hierarchy, and the liaison's proper role within it, based on a more liberal interpretation of liaison than that heretofore practiced by the British. This theme surfaces again in later articles, where Lawrence encourages his counterparts to let the Arabs do the fighting (as they always have). Lawrence's motivation for observing a strict chain of command with Feisal's army is partly an effort to assuage Arab fears over British intentions in the region.

Lawrence realized that the Arab perspective of the alliance was characterized by feelings of insecurity and suspicion about European motives--suspicions that would ultimately prove well founded. From the Arab point of view the alliance was lopsided (which made them nervous) and, given Britain's poor record of diplomatic veracity, the Arabs were also deeply suspicious of Britain's stated goals in the region. During one of their many informal councils Feisal commented to Lawrence:

You see we are now of necessity tied to the British. We are delighted to be their friends, grateful for their help, expectant of our future profit. But we are not British subjects. We would be more at ease if they were not such disproportionate allies.¹²

And though I know the British do not want it [Arabia], yet what can I say, when they took the Sudan, also not wanting it? They hunger for desolate lands, to build them up; and so, perhaps, one day Arabia will seem to them precious. Your good and my good, perhaps they are different.¹³

By encouraging British officers to work within the Arab chain of command, Lawrence hoped to convince the Arabs that British intentions, while perhaps not all they seemed (or purely altruistic), were at least not hostile to the Arab cause, and probably more aligned with Arab goals than possible with other alliance options for Arabia (which were limited). Finally, in liaison work, perception is reality; there is no quicker route to disaster than to be perceived as a threat to the commander's authority, or in some way a hindrance to the legitimate exercise of his prerogative. Lawrence was faced with an extreme case because the Bedouin were hierarchical, clannish, and naturally suspicious of strangers. These traits made coalition maintenance a difficult and time-consuming chore, which, with great insight, Lawrence wisely left to the Arabs. Pierce Joyce, another British officer working with the Arab Revolt, and one who observed Lawrence at work on several occasions, commented after the war that, "he [Lawrence] knew beforehand that his plan would be accepted, while the task of kindling enthusiasm among the tribesmen was best left to the Arab leaders."¹⁴

Article Eight: You are Most Effective When Unnoticed

Your ideal position is when you are present and not noticed. Do not be too intimate, too prominent, or too earnest. Avoid being identified too long or too often with any tribal sheikh, even if C. O. of the expedition. To do your work you must be above jealousies, and you lose prestige if you are associated with a tribe or clan and its inevitable feuds. Sherifs are above all blood-feuds and local rivalries, and form the only principle of unity among the Arabs. Let your name

therefore be coupled always with a Sherif's, and share his attitude toward the tribes. When the moment comes for action put yourself publicly under his orders. The Bedu will then follow suit.¹⁵

Article Eight is at the heart of Lawrence's technique for liaison. It reflects three prominent imperatives in the art of liaison as practiced by Lawrence. The first is subtlety and ubiquity. Lawrence believed a liaison officer was most effective when his influence was least apparent, and consequently, he should avoid being overly demonstrative when giving advice or making suggestions. The next imperative is to remain above the internal alignments inherent in any organization. A liaison's effectiveness will diminish (and his credibility suffer) if he is allied too closely with narrow constituencies within the organization. The third imperative is loyalty and solidarity with the decisions of the sherif. To do otherwise would undermine the sherif's authority and likely result in being marginalized in the decision making process.

Lawrence was acutely aware that he was an infidel in *terra incognita*, and that his presence was a mixed blessing for Feisal. Though Lawrence's advice (and the material support his presence implied) was welcome, his presence was also a source of rumor and innuendo, which, if poorly handled, could work to Feisal's detriment. Consequently, Lawrence took great pains, particularly early in the revolt when support for Feisal was shaky, to remain unobtrusive and deferent. Asher notes that, "At this time Lawrence still kept in the background--in the conference tent as well as outside. Although he was already in Feisal's confidence he paraded it so little that many of the Arabs who came to Feisal's camp ignored his presence."¹⁶

Lawrence also believed the best way to influence strategy was to apply subtle pressure evenly over time, rather than forceful arguments made episodically during

councils. The latter technique gave the appearance of panic or haste and wouldn't convey the confidence that Lawrence felt was so important to the art of liaison. While the former had the virtue of being so ubiquitous that the Arab leaders were often unaware of Lawrence's influence in specific decisions. Additionally, the more one can, over time, shape the final decision, while preserving the veneer of originality for the sherif, the better. In *The Uncrowned King of Arabia*, Asher summarized Lawrence's technique with Feisal,

He would try to ensure that the Sharif [Feisal] put his plans before him privately, and would always accept them and praise them, and then modify them imperceptibly by drawing suggestions from Feisal himself, until they accorded with Lawrence's own opinion. Once they were in agreement, he would hold him to it firmly and push him, so subtly that the Sharif was hardly aware of it.¹⁷

All organizations have their inevitable subgroups and cliques, some harmless, others less so. In Arabia, these internal alliances were usually tribal, and disputes between them were manifest. Lawrence believed strongly that an effective liaison officer must avoid any sympathies or entanglements with individual tribes or factions, otherwise his standing with the sherif would suffer. If Lawrence's association with anyone other than the commander to whom he was assigned became a distraction, it would taint his advice and cast a shadow of doubt on his motivations and loyalties. Feisal was the final arbiter in disputes among the tribes and upon his shoulders rested the burden of uniting the Arabs against the Turks. As Lawrence observed in *Seven Pillars*, "During two years Feisal so laboured daily, putting together and arranging in their natural order the innumerable tiny pieces which made up Arabian society, and combining them into his one design of war against the Turks."¹⁸ A liaison officer working within a coalition must

at all costs remain above the internal fray. For his advice to be taken at face value, it must arrive unencumbered of any emotional baggage.

Finally, an effective liaison must be loyal to and supportive of the commander. To be successful, a liaison officer needs access above all else. To gain access, he must have the leader's confidence, and to have his confidence he must be competent and loyal. Nothing will compromise a liaison's effectiveness more quickly than being barred from discussions concerning operations and dispositions. Lawrence's most precious asset with Feisal was his nearly unlimited access. It was through this access that Lawrence exerted such a strong influence over the prosecution of the Arab Revolt.

Article Fourteen: Pull Rather Than Push

While very difficult to drive, the Bedu are easy to lead, if you have the patience to bear with them. The less apparent your interferences the more your influence. They are willing to follow your advice and do what you wish, but they do not mean you or anyone else to be aware of that. It is only after the end of all annoyances that you find at bottom their fund of good will.¹⁹

The Bedu are an irascible people who, by virtue of their culture and history, are stridently independent and proud. Though unsophisticated, characterizing the Bedu as simple gives a poor indication of their true nature; elemental would be a more accurate description. Lawrence described them as, "a people of primary colours, or rather black and white . . . a dogmatic people, despising doubt, our modern crown of thorns. They did not understand our metaphysical difficulties, our introspective questionings. They knew only truth and untruth, belief and unbelief, without our hesitating retinue of finer shades."²⁰ For Europeans, working with the Bedu was challenging; it required them to adapt to a monochromatic view of life that was uncomfortable for many Westerners accustomed to a more vibrant metaphysical palette. Additionally, the harsh existence of

the Bedu also made them skeptical of and uncooperative toward faceless organizations and bureaucracies. The Bedu needed faces to go with names. As Lawrence said, “[The] Arabs believed in persons, not in institutions.”²¹ Their social structure prevented them from taking direction from anyone outside of their clan or tribe, except from a sherif or an emir, and then only when it pleased them. This system provided the “plausible deniability” their pride demanded. In other words, it allowed the Bedu to retain the appearance of taking action because they wanted to, not because someone else desired it. Appreciating this dynamic was key to getting the Bedu to act.

At the turn of the twentieth century most British officers’ experience abroad consisted of duty in British crown colonies--India, the Sudan, and Malaysia were common assignments. The occasional insurrection notwithstanding, colonial duty was largely administrative and constabulary, requiring a very different approach than liaison work. British officers accustomed to such duty often found the transition to an advisory capacity difficult. This tendency, Lawrence noted, made many officers unsuitable for service in the Hejaz where the British were liaisons, not colonial masters. Lawrence was convinced the Arabs could win if capably advised and, as Wilson points out, “[He] had seen how much depended on the attitude of the British liaison officers in the field.”²²

The key of course was to lead without being seen to lead, to have advice heeded without its origin appearing too obvious. In this there is an aspect that, at first glance, seems patronizing. The apparent presumption that those who receive advice are incapable of determining for themselves the proper tactic or strategy. Actually Lawrence had great respect for the Arabs’ ability to fight and devise a credible campaign plan. However, the *raison d’être* of a liaison was, after all, to advise, and doing so should not

be considered demeaning to the recipients. The Arabs were fighting an enemy who was organized, equipped, and trained to fight in ways unfamiliar to the Arabs, but very familiar to the British, hence the need for Lawrence and others like him. For modern liaison officers, the same dynamic remains: capable allies facing a situation for which they are unprepared or unaccustomed.

Article Fifteen: It is Their War, Let Them Fight It

Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not win it for them. Actually also, under the very odd conditions of Arabia, your practical work will not be as good as perhaps you think it is.²³

Part of Lawrence's genius as a liaison was his ability to see beyond the current situation and envision the desired end state, a talent he combined with an uncanny ability to correctly connect proximate actions to ultimate goals. For the Arab Revolt to succeed, according to his interpretation of both British and Arab goals, it was important that some things be done, and also that some things not be done. Lawrence's fifteenth article is an admonition in the inverse, that is, it is not so much about what should be done, as what should not be done. It is a warning and a reminder to potential liaison officers that this is the Arabs' war and the British need to let them fight it--liaisons talk, armies fight. As Lawrence said, "We are only contributing materials--and the Arabs have a right to go their own way and run things as they please. We are only guests."²⁴ Lawrence had three main reasons for this approach: one ideological, one philosophical, and one practical. In *The Uncrowned King of Arabia*, Asher succinctly captures the first two:

First, as an arch-propagandist, he [Lawrence] was aware that guerilla wars were fought partly on an ideological level, and to have infidel soldiers in the Hejaz would make Hussain look like a Muslin renegade ready to hand over the Holy Cities to unbelievers. Secondly--and to Lawrence even more important--if

the British were to fight Arab battles for them, the Arabs would have little claim, at the end of the war, to an independent state.²⁵

Both of these observations share a common theme--the effort to keep the Arab Revolt Arab. Lawrence realized that popular support (for Feisal in particular and the revolt in general) was based on the belief in an Arab-led uprising against an unpopular and onerous occupier, not Arab complicity in a grandiose game of colonial musical chairs. Interestingly, Lawrence's first piece of advice to Feisal was to deny him the very thing the Arabs were asking for at the time: a regiment of British regulars at Rabegh to protect Feisal's army from the advancing Turks. Lawrence disagreed with Feisal's request and recommend to Cairo that only advisors and materiel be sent. Surprisingly, this act put him in good stead with both camps; with Cairo because it neither wanted nor could afford to send troops to the Hejaz, and with Feisal because the decision established right away that Lawrence was not interested in British dominance (by fiat) of the Arab Revolt. Lawrence passed up a perfect opportunity to land British troops in the Hejaz; after all, Feisal was asking for them, but by advising against it, he reaped greater future benefits because of the credibility it established for him with Feisal.

Lawrence also knew that the Arabs would need all the arguments they could muster to lobby for an independent Arab nation at the post-war peace conferences, and they would dearly need the intellectual and emotional ammunition that comes with gaining a country the old fashioned way--earning it. Therefore Arab blood must pay the bill; if Feisal were to let Englishmen (in numbers) shed blood for Arabia he wouldn't have a leg to stand on. Even though Lawrence became an active participant in the revolt, he took great pains to remain, outwardly at least, a soldier-advisor and not a leader of Arabs. In *Lawrence: An Arab View*, Suleiman Mousa points out that, "Lawrence was

rarely, if ever, officially 'in command' of anyone. . . . He was an adviser, a very influential one, but on all major operations he was involved in against the Turks using sherifian troops or Bedouin, there was always an appointed Arab commander at least nominally in charge."²⁶

Finally, on a practical level it would be wishful to think that an Englishman can simply plop himself down in the middle of a region as harsh, unsympathetic, and alien as Arabia, and operate with the same level of skill and competence as the Bedouin. Though, in truth, if any race was capable of such hubris, it was the British. Even Lawrence, who was arguably more prepared to operate on an equal footing than most admitted in one of his articles, "Unnumbered generations of tribal raids have taught them more about some parts of the business than we will ever know."²⁷ Lawrence's system of liaison therefore had very practical reasons for letting the Arabs do the work. First, they were better at it, and second, doing it for themselves helped instill a sense of pride, purpose and common cause--an aspect lacking in Arabia for generations and part of what the Arab Revolt, and Lawrence's designs for it, were intended to create.

Article Twenty-two: Let Them Fight as They Fight Best

Do not try to trade on what you know of fighting. The Hejaz confounds ordinary tactics. Learn the Bedu principles of war as thoroughly and as quickly as you can, for till you know them your advice will be no good to the Sherif. Unnumbered generations of tribal raids have taught them more about some parts of the business than we will ever know. In familiar conditions they fight well, but strange events cause panic. Keep your unit small. Their raiding parties are usually from one hundred to two hundred men, and if you take a crowd they only get confused. Also, their sheikhs, while admirable company commanders, are too set to learn to handle the equivalents of battalions or regiments. Don't attempt unusual things, unless they appeal to the sporting instinct Bedu have so strongly, or unless success is obvious. If the objective is a good one (booty) they will attack like fiends: they are splendid scouts, their mobility gives you the advantage that will win this local war, they make proper use of their knowledge of the country (don't take tribesmen to places they don't know), and the gazelle hunters,

who form a proportion of the better men, are great shots at visible targets. A sheikh from one tribe cannot give orders to men from another: a sheriff is necessary to command a mixed tribal force. If there is plunder in prospect, and the odds are at all equal, you will win. Do not waste Bedu attacking trenches (they will not stand casualties) or in trying to defend a position, for they cannot sit still without slacking. The more unorthodox and Arab your proceedings the more likely you are to have the Turks cold, for they lack initiative and expect you to. Don't play for safety.²⁸

Though the longest (and most detailed) of Lawrence's *Twenty-seven Articles*, Article Twenty-two is included in its entirety because of its lucidity, insight, and economy of language. Article Twenty-Two is FM 100-5²⁹ for the Hejaz war in a single paragraph. In it is all the essential information one needs to fight a war using Bedouin warriors. Significantly, Article Twenty-two begins by admonishing the prospective liaison officer on three stark (and for a British military officer, rather self-deprecating) facts. First, forget normal tactics. Second, learn the Bedouin way of fighting. And third, accept that the Bedu know more about this than you ever will. This sets the perfect tone for what follows, continuing with Lawrence's general approach: do not assume you have all the answers, and, in the case of the Bedu, do not mistake lack of sophistication for stupidity.

What does follow is an extremely concise guide to the tactical capabilities of the Bedouin as warrior. In Article Twenty-two, Lawrence's terrific attention to detail is apparent in his description of various types of Bedouin fighters, their relative virtues and shortcomings, and consequently, how to organize, employ, and motivate them. From these observations it is easy to see where Lawrence developed his strategy for defeating the Turks--he designed it perfectly around what the Bedouin did best, and what the Turks did least well. In conversations after the war, Lawrence described to Liddell-Hart how he used the Bedouin "riding about in small parties tapping the Turks here and there, retiring always when the Turks advance, to appear in another direction immediately after, then

they [the Bedu] are in their element, and must cause the enemy not only anxiety but bewilderment.”³⁰

Probably Lawrence’s most significant insight was the asymmetry between how the traditional, Western style forces of the Turks must concentrate to fight, and the natural tendency for the nomadic Bedouin to disperse. He made these deductions seventy years before asymmetry would come into vogue doctrinally. Lawrence channeled this natural tendency into a tactic which, when used persistently against the Turks became highly successful. Lawrence was doing what all good commanders do; he was leveraging his strengths using the enemy’s weakness as the fulcrum. Liddell-Hart noted that, “Another example of Lawrence’s art in handling Arabs was seen in the way he guided their natural instinct for dispersion of effort. His aim was to hit without being hit, yet hit where it would hurt.”³¹ Lawrence’s earlier comment about the Bedouin being like a “vapour” is also germane here, his sherifian troops must have driven Jamal Pasha absolutely mad with frustration over these camel-mounted raiders.

Once Lawrence became confident in the effectiveness of the tactics he had developed for the Arabs, he was able to stop worrying so much about force ratios and the rather elastic nature of Feisal’s army (which suffered from large swings in manpower). Lawrence came to realize that classic ratios applied to the type of fight he was in were largely irrelevant, because he never intended to actually fight the Turks in engagements where those ratios are valid. As Lawrence put it, “The power of this striking force of ours would not to be reckoned merely by its strength. The ratio between number and area determined the *character of the war*, and by having *five times the mobility* of the Turks we could be *on terms with them with one-fifth their number*” (emphasis mine).³²

As interesting as they are, the tactics Lawrence used are incidental to the real lesson of Article Twenty-two. What contemporary liaison officers should take away from this article is how Lawrence first and foremost was an astute student of the forces to which he was attached. It is evident from his writing that Lawrence had developed a refined appreciation for what the Bedouin could do militarily, from which he rendered an insightful and critical appraisal of their capabilities as a fighting force. An object lesson for all modern liaison officers, Lawrence's focus was first on military capabilities inherent to the force, only then developing tactics designed to capitalize on those strengths. Today it is all too common to see the cart before the horse, determining strategy and tactics first, and then working to develop a force capable of executing it. Though this approach may be appropriate for designing and resourcing a force (the U.S. Army's current effort to restructure is a case in point), it is nevertheless highly inappropriate for a liaison officer who (usually) is there to offer advice on how to achieve the best effect with the forces on hand, not to redesign and refit them.

Article Twenty-three: See Beneath the Veil

The open reason Bedu give you for action or inaction may be true, but always there will be better reasons left for you to divine. You must find these inner reasons (they will be denied, but are none the less in operation) before shaping your arguments for one course or another. Allusion is more effective than logical exposition: they dislike concise expression. Their minds work just as ours do, but on different premises. There is nothing unreasonable, incomprehensible, or inscrutable in the Arab. Experience of them, and knowledge of their prejudices will enable you to foresee their attitude and possible cause of action in nearly every case.³³

In more contemporary terms, Article Twenty-three is all about knowing what "buttons to push." Lawrence was a master at this and much of his success can be traced to his ability to divine in a man the inner impetus toward action. Even as a young man,

Lawrence had an uncanny ability to separate the actual reasons for a person's actions from the stated reasons. With Feisal, in Arabia, cut free of the stifling military bureaucracy in Cairo, Lawrence, always unconventional, was able to find an outlet for this as-yet-untapped talent and put it to work. In *A Touch of Genius*, Brown and Cave note that, "He found he had a natural aptitude for this unusual kind of war, in which the focus was less on the carrying out of precise and detailed orders or on text-book routines than on diplomacy, personality and--perhaps most important of all--*awareness of the motivation and psychology* of his Arab companions" (emphasis mine).³⁴ Lawrence combined this ability with strong scholarship in socio-anthropology and, together in Arabia, they became a powerful tool for motivating Feisal and his army.

Lawrence understood that, in Arabia, there were two social strata involved in the revolt, the Arab aristocracy (emirs, sheriffs, and sheikhs) and the Bedouin tribesmen--each with a different reason for fighting. The Arab elite wanted the Ottoman occupation replaced by an independent Arab nation, which they would rule. In *Seven Pillars*, Lawrence quotes Feisal as saying, "What we want is a government which speaks our own language of Arabic and will let us live in peace. Also we hate those Turks."³⁵ In reality, this nascent Arab nation went far beyond the Arabian peninsula, extending north to Syria and Iraq, so even for the Hashemites there was some aspect of empire building, though the Arabs would say they were just reestablishing dominion over historically Arab lands.

The Bedouin, on the other hand, were never going to be ardent Arab nationalists. Asher point out that, "They hated Turks, wanted them out of their tribal districts, and were willing to go along with the Hashemites towards this end, but they valued their independence more highly than gold . . . their nation would always be the tribe, the tribe,

and the tribe.”³⁶ A “greater Arabia” did not resonate with the Bedu in the same way it did with the elites. As Lawrence said, “The Semites [Bedu] idea of nationality was the independence of the clans and villages, and their ideal of national union was episodic combined resistance to an intruder. Constructive policies, an organized state, and extended empire, were not so much beyond their sight as hateful in it. They were fighting to get rid of Empire, not win it.”³⁷

Article Twenty-three is interesting because it speaks to what is often the most challenging and frustrating aspect of liaison. Most liaison officers exercise no authority or hold any command and must, by the very nature of their position, affect change through persuasion rather than coercion. To do this effectively, Lawrence would say one must understand which factors are primary motivators and which are ancillary motivators for the forces being advised. All actors have stated and unstated reasons for taking a particular course. Lawrence argued that by combining a thorough understanding of the society with an unhurried and thoughtful observation of it in action, the liaison can determine the unstated motivations and shape his arguments to move the force in desired directions--largely unnoticed.

For What It Is Worth

At their most basic, Lawrence’s *Twenty-seven Articles* are a codification of a mental construct Lawrence used to work effectively with the Arabs. Their value lies not in an overly literal analysis of their content, but in a broad and reasoned study of the underlying principles animating their admonitions. At his best, Lawrence was a student of humanity, a careful and calculating manipulator of events and actions. It is less sinister than it sounds, because manipulation is, after all, what the art of liaison is all

about. In liaison perhaps more than in other fields, the ends drive the means. Lawrence was buttressed in his efforts by a well-developed ability to discover the roots of action in most men, and through an egalitarian approach to his fellow man, both informed by a keen sense of context and a thorough grasp of history.

Like it or hate it, at least Lawrence had a system. Contemporary liaison officers should also develop a system for an intellectual and practical approach to the people and the region where they work. Lawrence's system is a product of its time, replete with the thinly veiled superiority characteristic of the age. Yet within it are gems of insight, which should not be overlooked by virtue of their more circumspect surroundings. With some effort and goodwill, modern readers can see in Lawrence's articles the seeds of modern liaison work and, perhaps more importantly, the realization that we are all more alike than different, and a little understanding goes a long way.

¹T. E. Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin* (Cairo) 60 (20 August 1917): 348, in, Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1989), 960.

²A common Arabic phrase for Muslims, literally meaning, "God willing." Used anytime a future action is discussed.

³Malcom Brown and Julia Cave, *A Touch of Genius: The Life of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 70.

⁴Asher, *Lawrence*, 208.

⁵Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin*, in Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 960.

⁶Plural of sherif

⁷Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin*, in Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 960.

- ⁸Asher, *Lawrence*, 209.
- ⁹Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 122.
- ¹⁰*Ibid.*
- ¹¹Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin*, in Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 960.
- ¹²Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 99.
- ¹³Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 100.
- ¹⁴Pierce Joyce, quoted in Asher, *Lawrence*, 209.
- ¹⁵Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin*, in Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 960.
- ¹⁶Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence*, 108.
- ¹⁷Asher, *Lawrence*, 208.
- ¹⁸Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 176.
- ¹⁹Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin*, in Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 960.
- ²⁰Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 38.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, 25.
- ²²Wilson, *Lawrence.*, 357.
- ²³Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin*, in Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 960.
- ²⁴Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 351.
- ²⁵Asher, *Lawrence*, 170.
- ²⁶Suleiman Mousa, *T. E. Lawrence: An Arab View* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 101.

²⁷Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin*, in Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 960.

²⁸Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin*, in Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 960.

²⁹Field Manual (FM) 100-5 is the U.S. Army's manual for operations.

³⁰Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence*, 98.

³¹*Ibid.*, 255.

³²T. E. Lawrence quoted in Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence*, 138.

³³Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin*, in Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 960.

³⁴Brown and Cave, *A Touch of Genius.*, 70.

³⁵Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 101.

³⁶Asher, *Lawrence*, 207.

³⁷Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 100.

CHAPTER 4

THE FIRST MODERN LIAISON OFFICER

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *A Psalm of Life*

The Prism

In *Seven Pillars* Lawrence outlined the essential elements of his mission as well as his technique for achieving it. “I was sent to the Arabs as a stranger, unable to think their thoughts or subscribe their beliefs, but charged by duty to lead them forward and to develop to the highest any movement of theirs profitable to England in her war. If I could not assume their character, I could at least conceal my own, and pass among them without evident friction, neither a discord nor a critic but an unnoticed influence.”¹ Lawrence’s job was to subtly direct the course of events in a manner unobtrusive yet effective. In doing so he had to resolve the inherent contradictions in his task: advance the British position while not betraying the Arabs’. This internal conflict makes Lawrence’s story so relevant today. Divergent efforts, cross-purposes, and byzantine diplomacy are even more prevalent in our modern reality than in Lawrence’s time. How Lawrence achieved a semblance of harmony--strategically, operationally, and tactically--between the British and Arab goals is a pertinent object lesson for contemporary liaison officers.

Lawrence’s story is compelling because of its similarity to contemporary reality. Lawrence was an officer of an established, modern, organized, and otherwise “sophisticated” military, working with an incipient army whose structure, organization

and professionalism were still immature. The lesson in Lawrence's story is to check one's prejudices at the door and consider the military problem from a more universal perspective. Lawrence understood that sophistication is relative and, though he might be an intellectual dandy at a London cocktail party, he was a Godless rube in the eyes of the Bedouin, at least until he learned their land and their way of fighting. A clear vision and a willingness to put aside his Western biases and learn the wisdom of the desert was perhaps Lawrence's greatest gift. Combined with his passion for the region and sympathy for Arab nationalism, this made Lawrence a potent and valuable confidant for Feisal as well as a credible and capable emissary for the British.

Through the prism of history one can separate Lawrence's light into its primary colors: his personal attributes and his system for liaison that allowed him to exert subtle but effective influence. Divided in such a way, certain truths--undiminished by the passage of time--reassert themselves through Lawrence's experience. These truths can guide and educate the few who take the time to thoughtfully consider them. That is the beauty, and pity, of history.

The Tangible Intangibles

In the mid seventeenth century, in the midst of the European Enlightenment, Sir Francis Bacon said, "knowledge is power." Lawrence, exceedingly well read in the classics, and familiar with Sir Francis, understood only too well the truth at the heart of Bacon's comment. History often seems a series of accidents and coincidences connected only by chance and happenstance. In this sense, Lawrence's situation was typical. Lawrence, an intellectual effete, had no intention of a military career, or of spending his youth amid the deprivations and isolation of the Arabian desert. Yet, along with the rest

of his generation, Lawrence was swept up in one of the great tides of history, with his particular fate to be found alongside Feisal in the Hejaz, helping to free a people long under the yoke of occupation.

As chance would have it, Lawrence was well prepared for his particular accident of history. Lawrence's studies were expansive and classical, his knowledge of things martial were the outgrowth of an interest in architecture and archeology, not war. Yet it was the panoramic character of his knowledge and experience that was his greatest intellectual weapon. As Sir Liddell-Hart stated after the war, "This profound knowledge of historical experience, enriched by a general knowledge of many subjects that indirectly concerned war, formed an intellectual equipment such as no other commander of his time possessed."² The education of the man who would become "Lawrence of Arabia" can be generally divided into his pre-Cairo, Cairo, and post-Cairo periods. Before stepping ashore at Port Sa'id in 1916, Lawrence had been an academic and an archeologist. He possessed a formidable knowledge of classical history and literature, and had traveled extensively in the Middle East, living for a number of years among the Turks and Bedouins in Syria. He spoke Arabic and knew the culture, politics, history, and architecture of the Near and Middle East. These were his pre-war intellectual foundations.

His time in Cairo represented the accumulation of a much more specific type of knowledge. Lawrence spent his days watching the machinations of great powers in the throes of war, making maps, plotting Turkish positions, interviewing deserters, and reading diplomatic dispatches. Cairo served both as a martial baptism and a period of intense professional development for the uniformed version of Lawrence. Jeremy

Wilson, Lawrence's biographer, noted that, "No other British adviser in the Hejaz had the encyclopedic knowledge Lawrence had gained during two years in the Cairo Intelligence Department."³ When combined with the classical foundations of Lawrence's education, the practical and technical skills learned over nearly two years in Cairo created a fertile intellectual soil, which, when fertilized with the seeds of the Arab Revolt, bore fruit for the Arabs and British alike.

The abilities Lawrence brought to bear on the military and political challenges posed by the Arab Revolt proved to be just the right mix for the situation. Lawrence's intellectual and practical preparation (however accidental it may have been) can be used to help modern liaison officers understand the need for preparation and study. A broad general education including the study of military history will serve well as a foundation for later, more targeted, preparation and study. As Liddell-Hart commented, "It was through this [Lawrence's extensive reading of history in general and military history in particular] that in youth he had acquired his knowledge of the history and higher theory of war--I have never known a general who had read as widely."⁴ A focused regional expertise is likewise necessary, of which language is, of course, an essential element. Translation, by its very nature, involves the search for terms that only approximate the intent of the original speaker. Most languages have expressions that simply have no direct equivalent in English, and translation will only obscure the intended meaning. The synthesis of these elements--broad general education, military history, regional and language skills--will result in a cultural literacy that is essential to effective liaison work. Finally, for the military liaison officer, there is no substitute for soldier skills. The liaison's credibility rests ultimately on his ability to "walk the walk." Though Lawrence

was slight of build and had no practical military experience, his insightful and effective operational concept (based on a voracious reading of military history), combined with his practiced ability to suffer deprivation without complaint, earned him the grudging respect of the Arab fighters.

Lawrence was not a natural soldier; he was a learned soldier. But, perhaps Lawrence's experience is most valuable because of this fact, not in spite of it. Lawrence's success reminds today's observer that the operational skills, knowledge, and attributes needed to be an effective liaison officer can be developed. Lawrence said as much himself, "I was not an instinctive soldier, automatic with intuitions and happy ideas. When I took a decision, or adopted an alternative it was after doing my best to study every relevant--and many an irrelevant--factors. Geography, tribal structure, religion, social customs, language, appetites, standards--were at my finger-ends. The enemy I knew almost as well as my own side. I risked myself among them many times, to *learn*"⁵ (emphasis in original).

Principia Revisited

Lawrence helped the Arabs (and the British) defeat the Turks in part due to his unique individual gifts. But Lawrence also developed a system for working with the Arabs that was highly attuned to the predilections and sensitivities of his Arab warriors. Lawrence's *Twenty-seven Articles* are perhaps the first, and certainly one of the few attempts in history to develop a framework and guidance for liaison officers, who are unique in the military art because they exercise no command authority yet are nevertheless expected to influence the outcomes of battles and campaigns.

Lawrence's *Twenty-seven Articles* are essentially a well-reasoned and insightful summary of the art of liaison. By looking at the principles inherent in them one can glimpse the nature of the "art" Lawrence was practicing, and see threads of continuity between his era and the present. What Lawrence understood at the turn of the last century remains true at the turn of the next. In the final analysis, people change slowly, societies slower still. When considering Lawrence's story, one should focus not on the tools, but on the craftsmanship in their use, or as Liddell-Hart said, "The true line of comparison between the strategists of different ages lies through their art and not through their mechanism."⁶

Past as Prologue

Historically, Lawrence has been viewed as a sublime example of irregular and asymmetric warfare, which he certainly was. However, his contribution to the art of liaison has gone largely unnoticed, overshadowed by his tactical successes. It is an unfortunate blind spot in the historiography because, when considered from this perspective, it becomes apparent that Lawrence was the first liaison officer to appear in a form recognizable to today's military officers. But Lawrence's relevance is not just occupational; it's situational. Lawrence's experiences at the turn of the twentieth century were eerily similar to the reality at the turn of the twenty-first. Lawrence was an officer in the military of a large hegemonic, industrial nation, dispatched to work with the small, poorly organized, meagerly equipped, and untrained army of a preindustrial, emerging state still coming to terms with its own nascent nationalism. The goals of his nation and the goals of the Arabs were not entirely the same, yet he was expected to please both--a challenge eerily familiar to that faced by contemporary liaison officers.

Lawrence remains an enigma, and, at the end of the day, his contributions may be so shrouded in myth and hyperbole that his true influence is impossible to disentangle from the legend. Yet in Lawrence's story lies much wisdom about how to work, and fight, with people different than oneself, for aims different than one's own, but in the end to contrive, coerce and cajole a way forward for all. In this respect Lawrence is without peer in modern history, and his experience should be revisited with a more critical eye toward these lessons. It has become de rigueur to talk of how the U.S. military will never again fight alone--unilateralism is dead in the twenty-first century's global village. If this be true, history should be culled for stories like Lawrence's, for in a world as small as today's one will not have the luxury of rediscovering hard learned lessons on the battlefield. Getting it right the first time is now more important than ever. Lawrence, and others like him, has much to say. Is anyone listening?

¹Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 10.

²Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence*, 388.

³Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia*, 355.

⁴Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence*, 388.

⁵T. E. Lawrence quoted in Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence*, 388.

⁶Liddell-Hart, *Lawrence*, 383.

APPENDIX

TWENTY-SEVEN ARTICLES

by T. E. Lawrence August 1917

The following notes have been expressed in commandment form for greater clarity and to save words. They are, however, only my personal conclusions, arrived at gradually while I worked in the Hejaz and now put on paper as stalking horses for beginners in the Arab armies. They are meant to apply only to Bedu: townspeople or Syrians require totally different treatment. They are of course not suitable to any other person's need, or applicable unchanged in any particular situation. Handling Hejaz Arabs is an art, not a science, with exceptions and no obvious rules. At the same time we have a great chance there: the Sherif trusts us, and has given us the position (towards his Government) which the Germans wanted to win in Turkey. If we are tactful we can at once retain his good will, and carry out our job--but to succeed we have got to put into it all the interest and energy and skill we possess.

1. Go easy just for the first few weeks. A bad start is difficult to atone for, and the Arabs form of their judgments on externals that we ignore. When you have reached the inner circle in a tribe you can do as you please with yourself and them.

2. Learn all you can about your Ashraf and Bedu. Get to know their families clans and tribes, friends and enemies, wells, hills and roads. Do all this by listening and by indirect enquiry. Do not ask questions. Get to speak their dialect of Arabic, not yours. Until you can understand their allusions avoid getting deep into conversation, or you will drop bricks. Be a little stiff at first.

3. In matters of business deal only with the commander of the army, column or party in which you serve. Never give orders to anyone at all and reserve your directions or advice for the C. O., however great the temptation (for efficiency's sake) of dealing direct with his underlings. Your place is advisory, and your advice is due to the commander alone. Let him see that this is your conception of your duty, and that his is to be the sole executive of your joint plans.

4. Win and keep the confidence of your leader. Strengthen his prestige at your expense before others when you can. Never refuse or quash schemes he may put forward: but insure that they are put forward in the first instance privately to you. Always approve them, and after praise modify them insensibly, causing the suggestions to come from him, until they are in accord with your own opinion. When you attain this point, hold him to it, keep a tight grip on his ideas, and push him forward as firmly as possible, but secretly so that no one but himself (and he not too clearly) is aware of your pressure.

5. Remain in touch with your leader as constantly and unobtrusively as you can. Live with him, that at mealtimes and at audiences you may be naturally with him in his tent. Formal visits to give advice are not so good as the constant dropping of ideas in casual talk. When stranger sheikhs coming in for the first time to swear allegiance and offer

service clear out of the tent. If their first impression is of foreigners in the confidence of the Sherif, it will do the Arab cause much harm.

6. Be shy of too close relations with the subordinates of the expedition. Continued intercourse with them will make it impossible for you to avoid going behind or beyond the instructions that the Arab C. O. has given them on your advice: and in so disclosing the weakness of his position you altogether destroy your own.

7. Treat the sub chiefs of your force quite easily and lightly. In this way you hold yourself above their level. Treat the leader, if a Sherif, with respect. He will return your manner, and you and he will then be alike, and above the rest. Precedence is a serious matter among the Arabs, and you must attain it.

8. Your ideal position is when you are present and not noticed. Do not be too intimate, too prominent, or too earnest. Avoid being identified too long or too often with any tribal sheikh, even if C. O. of the expedition. To do your work you must be above jealousies, and you lose prestige if you are associated with a tribe or clan and its inevitable feuds. Sherifs are above all blood-feuds and local rivalries, and form the only principle of unity among the Arabs. Let your name therefore be coupled always with a Sherif's, and share his attitude toward the tribes. When the moment comes for action put yourself publicly under his orders. The Bedu will then follow suit.

9. Magnify and develop the growing conception of the Sherifs as the natural aristocracy of the Arabs. Inter-tribal jealousies make it impossible for any sheikh to attain a commanding position, and the only hope of union in nomad Arabia is that the Ashraf be universally acknowledged as the ruling class. Sherifs are half-townsmen, half-nomad, in manner and life, and have the instinct of command. Mere merit and money would be insufficient to obtain such recognition: but the Arab reverence for pedigree and the prophet gives hope for the ultimate success of the Ashraf.

10. Call your Sherif 'Sidi' in public and in private. Call other people by their ordinary names, without title. In intimate conversation call a Sheikh 'Abu Annad,' or 'Akhu Alia' or some similar by-name.

11. The foreigner and Christian is not a popular person in Arabia. However friendly and informal the treatment of yourself may be, remember always that your foundations are very sandy ones. Wave a Sherif in front of you like a banner, and hide your own mind and person. If you succeed you will have hundreds of miles of country and thousands of men under your orders, and for this it is worth bartering the outward show.

12. Cling tight on your sense of humour. You will need it every day. A dry irony is the most useful type, and repartee of a personal and not too broad character will double your influence with the chiefs. Reproof if wrapped up in some smiling form will carry further and last longer than the most violent speech. The power of mimicry or parody is valuable but use it sparingly for wit is more dignified than humour. Do not cause a laugh at a Sherif except amongst Sherifs.

13. Never lay hands on an Arab: you degrade yourself. You may think the resultant obvious increase of outward respect a gain to you: but what you have really done is to build a wall between you and their inner selves. It is difficult to keep quiet when everything is being done wrong, but the less you lose your temper the greater your advantage. Also then you will not go mad yourself.
14. While very difficult to drive, the Bedu are easy to lead, if you have the patience to bear with them. The less apparent your interferences the more your influence. They are willing to follow your advice and do what you wish, but they do not mean you or anyone else to be aware of that. It is only after the end of all annoyances that you find at bottom their fund of good will.
15. Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not win it for them. Actually also, under the very odd conditions of Arabia, your practical work will not be as good as perhaps you think it is.
16. If you can, without being too lavish forestall presents to yourself. A well placed gift is often most effective in winning over a suspicious sheikh. Never receive a present without giving a liberal return, but you may delay this return (while letting its ultimate certainty be known) if you require a particular service from the giver. Do not let them ask you for things, since their greed will then make them look upon you only as a cow to milk.
17. Wear an Arab headcloth when with a tribe. Bedu have a malignant prejudice against the hat, and believe that our persistence in wearing it (due probably to British obstinacy of dictation) is founded on some immoral or irreligious principle. A thick headcloth forms a good protection against the sun, and if you wear a hat your best Arab friends will be ashamed of you in public.
18. Disguise is not advisable. Except in special areas let it be clearly known that you are a British officer and a Christian. At the same time if you can wear Arab kit when with the tribes you will acquire their trust and intimacy to a degree impossible in uniform. It is however dangerous and difficult. They make no special allowances for you when you dress like them. Breaches of etiquette not charged against a foreigner are not condoned to you in Arab clothes. You will be like an actor in a foreign theater, playing a part day and night for months, without rest, and for an anxious stake. Complete success, which is when the Arabs forget your strangeness and speak naturally before you, counting you one of themselves, is perhaps only attainable in character: while half success (all that most of us will strive for-- the other costs too much) is easier to win in British things, and you yourself will last longer, physically and mentally, in the comfort that they mean. Also then the Turks will not hang you when you're caught.

19. If you wear Arab things, wear the best. Clothes are significant among the tribes, and you must wear the appropriate, and appear at ease in them. Dress like a Sherif-- if they agree to it.

20. If you wear Arab things at all, go the whole way. Leave your English friends and customs on the coast, and fall back on Arab habits entirely. It is possible, starting thus level with them, for the European to beat the Arabs at their own game, for we have stronger motives for our action, and put more heart into it than they. If you can surpass them, you have taken an immense stride toward complete success, but the strain of living and thinking in a foreign and half-understood language, the savage food, strange clothes, and still stranger ways, with the complete loss of privacy and quiet, and the impossibility of ever relaxing your watchful imitation of the others for months on end, provide such an added stress to the ordinary difficulties of dealing with the Bedu, the climate, and the Turks, that this road should not be chosen without serious thought.

21. Religious discussions will be fairly frequent. Say what you like about your own side, and avoid criticism of theirs, unless you know that the point is external, when you may score heavily by proving it so. With the Bedu Islam is so all-pervading an element that that there is little religiosity, little fervour, and no regard for externals. Do not think, from their conduct, that they are careless. Their conviction of the truth of their faith, and its share in every act and thought and principle of their daily life is so intimate and intense as to be unconscious, unless roused by opposition. Their religion is as much a part of nature to them as is sleep, or food.

22. Do not try to trade on what you know of fighting. The Hejaz confounds ordinary tactics. Learn the Bedu principles of war as thoroughly and as quickly as you can, for till you know them your advice will be no good to the Sherif. Unnumbered generations of tribal raids have taught them more about some parts of the business than we will ever know. In familiar conditions they fight well, but strange events cause panic. Keep your unit small. Their raiding parties are usually from one hundred to two hundred men, and if you take a crowd they only get confused. Also, their sheikhs, while admirable company commanders, are too set to learn to handle the equivalents of battalions or regiments. Don't attempt unusual things, unless they appeal to the sporting instinct Bedu have so strongly, or unless success is obvious. If the objective is a good one (booty) they will attack like fiends: they are splendid scouts, their mobility gives you the advantage that will win this local war, they make proper use of their knowledge of the country (don't take tribesmen to places they don't know), and the gazelle hunters, who form a proportion of the better men, are great shots at visible targets. A sheikh from one tribe cannot give orders to men from another: a Sheriff is necessary to command a mixed tribal force. If there is plunder in prospect, and the odds are at all equal, you will win. Do not waste Bedu attacking trenches (they will not stand casualties) or in trying to defend a position, for they cannot sit still without slacking. The more unorthodox and Arab your proceedings the more likely you are to have the Turks cold, for they lack initiative and expect you to. Don't play for safety.

23. The open reason Bedu give you for action or inaction may be true, but always there will be better reasons left for you to divine. You must find these inner reasons (they will be denied, but are none the less in operation) before shaping your arguments for one course or another. Allusion is more effective than logical exposition: they dislike concise expression. Their minds work just as ours do, but on different premises. There is nothing unreasonable, incomprehensible, or inscrutable in the Arab. Experience of them, and knowledge of their prejudices will enable you to foresee their attitude and possible cause of action in nearly every case.

24. Do not mix Bedu and Syrians, or trained men and tribesmen. You will get work out neither, for they hate each other. I have never seen a successful combined operation, but many failures. In particular, ex-officers of the Turkish army, however Arab in feelings and blood and language, are hopeless with Bedu. They are narrow-minded in tactics, unable to adjust themselves to irregular warfare, clumsy in Arab etiquette, swollen-headed to the extent of being incapable of politeness to a tribesmen for more than a few minutes, impatient, and, usually, helpless on the road and in action. Your orders (if you were unwise enough to give any) would be more readily obeyed by Beduins than those of any Mohammedan Syrian officer. Arab townsmen and Arab tribesmen regard each other mutually as poor relations--and poor relations are much more objectionable than poor strangers.

25. In spite of ordinary Arab example avoid too free talk about women. It is as difficult a subject as religion, and their standards are so unlike our own, that a remark harmless in English may appear as unrestrained to them, as some of their statements would look to us, if translated literally.

26. Be as careful of your servants as of yourself. If you want a sophisticated one you will probably have to take an Egyptian, or a Sudani, and unless you are very lucky he will undo on trek much of the good you so laboriously effect. Arabs will cook rice and make coffee for you, and leave you if required to do unmanly work like cleaning boots or washing. They are only really possible if you are in Arab kit. A slave brought up in the Hejaz is the best servant, but there are rules against British subjects owning them, so they have to be lent to you. In any case take with you an Ageyli¹ or two when you go up country. They are the most efficient couriers in Arabia, and understand camels.

27. The beginning and ending of the secret of handling Arabs is unrelenting study of them. Keep always on your guard; never say an inconsidered thing, or do an unnecessary thing: watch yourself and your companions all the time: hear all that passes, search out what is going on beneath the surface, read their characters, discover their tastes and their weaknesses, and keep everything you find out to yourself. Bury yourself in Arab circles, have no interests and no ideas except the work in hand, so that your brain shall be saturated with one thing only, and you realise your part deeply enough to avoid little slips that would undo the work of weeks. Your success will be just proportional to the amount of mental effort you devote to it.²

¹A Bedu tribe renowned for its marksmanship and camel riding skills. Often used as hired bodyguards.

²T. E. Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *Arab Bulletin* (Cairo) 60 (20 August 1917): 348, in, Jeremy Wilson, *Lawrence of Arabia: The Authorized Biography of T. E. Lawrence* (New York: Atheneum, 1989), 960.

GLOSSARY

Terms

- Caliph. Literally “successor” to the Prophet. The preeminent Islamic leader, considered the leader of the faith. Religious title usually assumed by the Ottoman sultans after they conquered the Arabs.
- Emir. The highest rung of Islamic political-religious hierarchy. An emir usually controls an area of territory, including its cities and holds the allegiance of the sherifs within his area. Often translated as ‘Prince.’
- Haj. The annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Islam requires the faithful to perform the haj at least once in their lifetime. Economically important to the city of Mecca, and the Hejaz region.
- Jihad. Literally, “struggle,” often translated as “Holy War.” A declared religious struggle by Muslims in defense of the faith. Theologically, Jihad refers to the internal struggle within each believer to live according to the precepts of Islam and the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed.
- Mullah. Islamic scholar
- Pasha. High civic or military official in the Ottoman Empire
- Sheikh. An Arab tribal leader, usually over a single tribe or clan.
- Sherif. An Arab chieftain; usually claiming direct descent from the Prophet Mohammed. In Islam Sherifs hold quasi-political status; they usually hold sway over several tribes whose Sheikhs have pledged allegiance to the Sherif. One step below an Emir.
- Sublime Porte. Colloquially, the Ottoman Government, circa 1900
- Sultan. The supreme monarch of the Ottoman Empire who occupies the palace in Istanbul (Constantinople).

People

- Abdul Hamid, Sultan. The Ottoman sultan deposed by the Young Turk revolt. Also known as “Abdul the Dammed.”
- Abdullah. Second son of Hussein ibn Ali; later the first King of Trans-Jordan (Jordan).
- Ali. Eldest son of Hussein ibn Ali

Allenby, General. Commanding General of the British Palestinian Expeditionary Force that fought the Turks through Palestine to Damascus.

Clayton, Colonel. Chief of the Cairo Intelligence branch for the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force. Lawrence's boss while assigned there.

Hogarth, D. G. Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, as well as director of the archeological dig at Carchemish. A lifelong confidant and father figure to Lawrence.

Enver Pasha. Leading figure in the Young Turk movement. Enver was Defense Minister and Commanding General of the Ottoman Army during World War I.

Feisal. Third son of Hussein ibn Ali; principal Arab military leader during the Arab Revolt and focus of Lawrence's liaison duties. Later, King of Syria (briefly) and then King of Iraq.

Hussein ibn Ali. The Emir of Mecca. Senior member of the Hashemite family and instigator of the Arab Revolt. Father to Abdullah, Ali, Feisal, and Zeid.

Jemal Pasha. The Turkish military governor in Syria during the time Lawrence was in Arabia.

Kitchener, Lord. High Commissioner (Agent) for the British in Egypt prior to Lawrence's arrival. Commissioned the *Wilderness of Zin*. Later became Secretary of War for the British during World War I.

McMahon, Sir Henry. High Commissioner for the British in Egypt during Lawrence's time there. Replaced Kitchener.

Storrs, Ronald. Oriental Secretary of the Residency in Cairo. Lawrence called him the "most brilliant Englishman in the Near East."

Zeid. Youngest son of Hussein ibn Ali, Emir of Mecca.

Places

Anatolia. The heart of the Ottoman Empire, conforms to the Asia Minor part of present-day Turkey.

Aquaba. Jordanian Red Sea port, at the northeastern corner of the Sinai peninsula at the northern tip of the Gulf of Aquaba (eastern fork of the Red Sea).

Assir. The area just south of the Hejaz that conforms roughly to present-day Yemen.

Hejaz. The area of the Arabian peninsula ruled by the Hashemites and containing the holy cities Mecca and Medina. The Arab Revolt began here. Its southern boundary is just south of Mecca, and its northern boundary is near the present day Saudi Arabian town Tabuk.

Kut. Town on the Euphrates River in modern-day Iraq; site of the Ottoman siege and ultimate defeat of a British Indian Army

Levant. Nineteenth century term for extreme western Syria and Lebanon; more broadly, the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea and its hinterland.

Mesopotamia. Land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. More generally considered as present-day Iraq.

Negev. Desert on the Sinai Peninsula near the western border of present day Jordan and the southern border of Israel. This is the area Lawrence mapped for Kitchener and published in *The Wilderness of Zin*.

Sinai. The peninsula east of the Suez Canal, west of the Gulf of Aquaba, and south of Israel.

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